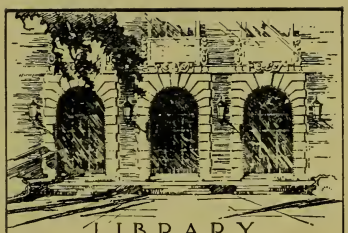
A Witch of the Hills

Florence Warden

Michael Sadleir



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A WITCH OF THE HILLS

A WITCH OF THE HILLS

BY

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IN TWO VOLUMES

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A WITCH OF THE HILLS

CHAPTER I

Poor little witch! I think she left all her spells and love-philters behind her, when she let herself be carried off from Ballater to Bayswater, a spot where no sorcery more poetical or more interesting than modern Spiritualism finds a congenial home. What was her star about not to teach her that human hearts can beat as passionately up among the quiet hills and the dark fir-forests as down amid the rattle and the roar of the town? Well, well; it is only in the grave

that we make no mistakes; and life and love, God knows, are mysteries beyond the ken of a chuckle-headed country gentleman, with just sense enough to handle a gun and land a salmon.

And the sum and substance of all this is that the Deeside hills are very bleak in December, that the north wind sighs and sobs, whistles and howls among the ragged firs and the bending larches in a manner fearsome and eerie to a lonely man at his silent fireside, and that books are but sorry substitutes for human companions when the deer are safe in their winter retreat in the forests, and the grouse-moors are white with snow. So here's for another pine-log on the fire, and a glance back at the fourteen years which have slipped away since I shut the gates of the world behind me.

The world! The old leaven is still there then, that after fourteen years of voluntary

—almost voluntary—exile, I still call that narrow circle of a few hundreds of not particularly wise, not particularly interesting people—the world! They were wise enough and interesting enough for me at three and twenty, though, when by the death of my elder brother I leapt at once from an irksome struggle, with expensive tastes, on a stingy allowance of three hundred a year, to the full enjoyment of an income of eight thousand.

How fully I appreciated the delights of that sudden change from 'ineligible' to 'eligible!' How quickly I began to feel that, in accepting an invitation, instead of receiving a favour I now conferred one! My new knowledge speedily transformed a harmless and rather obliging young man into an insufferable puppy; but the puppy was welcomed where the obliging young man had hardly been tolerated. Beautifully gradual the change was, both in me and

in my friends; for we were all well bred, and knew how to charge the old formulas with new meaning. 'You will be sure to come, won't you?' from a hostess to me, was no longer a crumb of kindness, it was an entreaty. 'You are very kind,' from me, expressed now not gratitude, but condescension. A rather nice girl, who had been scolded for dancing with me too often, was now, like the little children sent out in the streets to beg, praised or blamed by her mother according to the degree of attention I had paid her. I did not share the contempt of the other men of my own age for this manœuvring mamma and the rest of her kind, though I daresay I spoke of them in the same tone as they did. In the first place, I was flattered by their homage to my new position, interested as it was; and in the second, in their presence we were all so much alike, in dress, manner, and what

by courtesy is called conversation, that the poor ladies might well be excused for judging our merits by the only tangible point of difference—our relative wealth.

In our tastes, our vices, real or assumed, there was equally little to choose between us. We knew little about art and less about literature. In politics we were dogged and illogical partisans of politicians, and cared nothing for principles. Religion we left to women, who shared with horses the chief place in our thoughts. Nature having fortunately denied to the latter animals the power of speech, there was no danger of the two classes of our favourites coming into active rivalry.

In the intoxication of early manhood, while the mind was still in the background to the senses, the surface of things provided entertainment enough for us. Characters and even characteristics were merged in a

uniformity of folly without malice, and vice without depravity. If we gambled, we lost money which did no good while in our hands; if we gave light love, it was to ladies who asked for no more; if we drank, we only clouded intellects which were never employed in thought.

Looking back on that time from the serene eminence of nine and thirty, I can see that I was a fool, but also that I got my money's worth for my folly, which is more than I can say for all my later aberrations of intellect. And if, on the brink of forty, I find I can give a less logical account of my actions and feelings than I could at the opening of life, it is appalling to think what a consummate ass I may be if I live another twenty years! I begin to wish I had set myself some less humiliating task, to fill my lonely hours by a mountain winter fireside, than this of tracing the process by which the

idiot of five and twenty became the lunatic of five and thirty. Well, it's too late to go back, now that I have called up the old ghosts and felt again the terrible fascination of the touch of the now gaunt fingers. So here's for a dash at my work with the best grace I can.

I had been enjoying my accession to fortune for about eighteen months, during which I had devoted what mind and soul I possessed wholly to the work of catering for the gratification of my senses, when I fell for the first time seriously in love, as the natural sequence of having exhausted the novelty of coarser excitements.

Lady Helen Normanton was the third daughter of the Marquis of Castleford, a beauty in her first season, who had made a sensation on her presentation, and had attracted the avowed admiration of no less a person than the Earl of Saxmundham, such

a great catch, with his rumoured revenues of eighty or ninety thousand a year, that for a comparative pauper with a small and already encumbered estate like mine to dare to appear in the lists against him seemed the height of conceit or the depth of idiotcy. But Lady Helen's eyes were bright enough, and her smile sweet enough, to turn any man's head. They caused me to form the first set purpose of my life, and I dashed into my wooing with a headlong earnestness that soon made my passion the talk of my friends. I had one advantage on my side upon which I must confess that I largely relied; I was good-looking enough to have earned the sobriquet of 'Handsome Harry,' and I was quite as much alive to my personal attractions, quite as anxious to show them to the best advantage, as any female professional beauty. It was agony to think that, having already exhausted my imagination in the

invention of devices by which, in the restricted area of man's costume, I should always appear a little better dressed than any one else, I could do nothing more for my love than I had done for my vanity. As a last resource I curled my hair.

The boldness of my devotion soon began to tell. The Earl of Saxmundham was fifty-two, had a snub nose, and was already bald. Lady Helen was very young, sweet and simple, and perhaps scarcely realised yet what much handsomer horses and gowns and diamonds are to be got with eighty thousand a year than with eight. So she smiled at me and danced with me, and said nothing at all in the sweetest way when I poured out my passion in supper-rooms and conservatories, and giggled with the most adorable childlikeness when I kissed her little hand, still young enough to be rather red, and told her that she had inspired me with the wish

to be great for her sake. And the end of it was that the Earl began to retreat, and that I was snubbed, and that these snubs, being to me an earnest of victory, I became ten times more openly, outrageously daring than before, and my suit being vigorously upheld by one of her brothers, who had become an oracle in the family on the simple basis of being difficult to please, I was at last most reluctantly accepted as Lady Helen's betrothed lover.

My success gave me the sort of prestige of curiosity which passionate earnestness, in this age when we associate passion with seedy Bohemians and earnestness with Methodist preachers, can easily excite among a generation of men who, having no stimulating iron bars or stone walls between them and their lady-loves, can reserve the best of their energies for other and more exciting pursuits. I was the respectable Paris to a

proper and perfectly well-conducted Helen, the Romeo to a new Juliet. My wooing and engagement became a society topic, the subject of many interesting fictions. Spreading to circles a little more remote, in the absence of any Downing Street blunder or Clapham tragedy, the story became more romantic still. I myself overheard on the Underground Railway the exciting narration of how I forced my way at night into the Marquis's bedroom, after having concealed myself for some hours behind a Japanese screen in the library; how, revolver in hand, I had forced the unwilling parent to accede to my demand for his daughter's hand, and much more of the same kind, listened to with incredulity, but still with interest.

It was hard that, after the *éclat* of such a beginning, our engagement should have continued on commonplace lines, but so it did. My love for this fair girl, being the first deep

emotion of a life which had begun to pall upon me by its frivolity, had struck far down and moved to life within me the best feelings of a man's nature. I began to be ashamed of myself, to feel that I was a futile coxcomb, only saved from being ridiculous by being one of a crowd of others like me. I gave up betting, that I might have more money to spend on presents for her; less legitimate pleasures I renounced as a matter of course, with shame that the arms which were to protect my darling should have been so profaned; vanity having made me a 'masher,' love made me a man. Unluckily, Helen was too young and too innocent to appreciate the difference; her eyes still glowed at the sight of French bonbons, she liked compliments better than conversation, and burst into tears when one evening, as she was dressed for a ball, I broke, in kissing her, the heads of some lilies of the valley she was

wearing. The little petulant push she gave me opened my eyes to the fact that no sooner had I discovered myself to be a fool in one way than I had straightway fallen into as great an error in another direction. It dawned upon me for the first time, as I sat opposite to Helen and her mother in the barouche on our way to the ball, what a horrible likeness there was, seen in this half-light of the carriage lamps, between Helen with her sweet blue eyes and features so delicately lovely that they made one think of Queen Titania, with an uncomfortable thought of one's self as the ass, and the placid Marchioness, whose features at other times one never noticed, so utterly insignificant a nonentity was she by reason of the vacuous stolidity which was carried by her to the point of absolute distinction. Would Helen be like that at forty? Worse still, was Helen like that now? It was a horrible

thought, which subsequent experience unhappily did not tend to dispel. My first serious love had worked too great a revolution in me, had made me conscious of needs unfelt before, so that I now found that mere innocence in the woman who was to be the goddess of my life was not enough ; I must have capacity for thought, for passion.

All this I had taken for granted at first, while the struggle to win her occupied all my energies ; but when from the mad aspirant I became the proud betrothed, I had leisure to find out that the beautiful, dreamy, far-away eyes of my *fiancée* in no way denoted a poetic temperament, that her romance consisted merely in the preference for a handsome face to an ugly one, and in the inability to understand that she, an Earl's daughter and a spoilt child, could by any possibility fail to obtain anything to which she had taken a fancy. I was surprised at the

rapidity with which I, a man seriously and deeply in love, came to these conclusions about the girl who had inspired my passion. I could even, looking into the future, foretell the kind of life we should lead together as man and wife, when she, fallen from the ideal position of inspiring goddess to that of a tame pet rabbit, bored to death by my solemnity when I was serious, and frightened by my impetuosity when I was gay, would discover, with quick woman's instinct, that the best of myself was no longer given to her, and cavilling at the neglect of a husband whose society oppressed her, would find compensation for her wrongs among more frivolous companions. So that, weary of frivolity myself, my wife would avenge my defection.

I suppose almost every man, in the sober hours which alternate with the paroxysms of the wildest passions, can form a tolerably correct forecast of his life with the woman

who likes to believe that she has cast him into an infatuation whose force is blinding. The picture is always with him, showing now in bright colours, now in dark; varying a little in its outlines from time to time, but remaining substantially the same, and more or less accurate according to the measure of his intellect and experience; not at all the picture of even an earthly paradise, but yet with charms which satisfy human longings, and make it hard to part with. So I, having made up my mind that beauty, gentleness and modesty, good birth and fairly good temper were the only attributes of my future wife on which I could rely, philosophically decided that they formed as good an equipment as I had any right to expect, doubled my offerings of flowers and bonbons, and transferred the disquisitions on art, literature, religion and politics, in which I had begun to indulge, to her brother.

Lord Edgar Normanton was a tall, fair, broad-shouldered young man, who, while joining in all the frivolous amusements of his age and station, did so in a grave, leisurely, and reflective manner, which caused him to be looked up to as one capable of higher things, whose presence at a cricket match was a condescension, and who appeared at balls with some occult purpose connected with the study of human nature. I had always looked upon his special friendship for me as an honour, of which I felt that my new departure, in deciding that I had sown wild oats enough, made me more worthy. It never occurred to me to ask myself or anybody else whether his wild oats were sown. It was enough for me that he was glad when mine were. With the loyalty of most young men to their ideals of their own sex, I would far rather have discovered a new and unsuspected flaw in Helen's char-

acter than have learnt anything to shake my respect for her brother. Women, when not considered as angels, can only be looked upon as fascinating but inferior creatures, whose faults must be overlooked as irremediable, in consideration of their contributions to the comfort or the pleasure of man. One may argue about them, but, except as a relaxation, one cannot argue with them.

Edgar was openly delighted at my engagement with his sister, which he considered merely in the light of a tie to bring us two men closer together. Such a little nonentity as I found he considered his sister to be might think herself lucky to be honoured by such a use.

This was the position of affairs when a memorable shooting party in Norfolk, of which both Edgar and I formed members, resulted in an accident which was to bring my love affair to an end as sensational as its beginning.

CHAPTER II

We were engaged upon that hospitable abomination at a shooting party—a champagne luncheon. Having made a very fair bag for my morning's work, and being tired with my exertions, I was inclined to think that the serious business of the day was over for me, and that I might take it easy as regarded further effort. Edgar, who, since his discovery that my fervour on the subject of his sister had grown less ardent, was inclined to assume more of the character of mentor towards me than I cared about, had seated himself on the ground beside me; but I had found an opportunity of changing seats, for

I felt less well-disposed towards him that morning than I had ever been before.

The fact was that the gentle Helen had snubbed me two evenings previously for a demonstration of affection which I had carefully prepared, lest she, too, should have noticed the waning in my love. Upon this I had retreated, with a very odd mixture of feelings towards my *fiancée*, and there had been a reserve between us for the whole of the evening, which Edgar somewhat unwisely interfered to break. Looking upon myself as the injured person, I had resented the homily he felt himself called upon to administer, and though I made my peace with Helen next day, I avoided her brother. He made two or three good-natured overtures to me in the manner of an experienced nurse to a froward child, but on the morning of the shooting party I was still as far as ever from being reconciled to the paternal

intervention of Edgar the Wise and the Good.

'The Ladies!' cried one of the party, leaning lazily back on his arm and raising his glass.

'Say "Woman,"' I amended; 'it's more comprehensive.'

'Well, but "The Ladies!" ought to be comprehensive enough for you just now, Maude,' said some one, glancing mischievously at Edgar, whose solemnity was increasing, and scenting something warmer than controversy.

'Not now, nor ever!' said I, with more daring than good taste. 'In "Woman" we can secretly worship an ideal better than ourselves. In "The Ladies" we must bow down to creatures lower than ourselves, whose beauty deceives us, whose frivolity degrades us, and whom nothing more sacred than our care and their own coldness pro-

tects from the fate of fellow-women whom before them we do not dare to name.'

Everybody looked up in astonishment, and Edgar's red healthy face became purple with anger.

'A man who holds such opinions concerning ladies is probably better qualified to judge that other class which he has the singular taste to mention in the same sentence with them.'

'Perhaps. It is easier to find mercy for victims than for tyrants.'

Edgar rose to his feet with the ponderous dignity of an offended giant.

'If I had known your opinions on this subject a little earlier, Mr. Maude, I should never have allowed you to form an alliance with my family.'

I rose too, as hot as he; and secretly alarmed and repentant at the lengths to which my recklessness had carried me, I was

not ready to submit to the didactic rough-riding of the man who had long ago himself instilled into me his own supreme contempt for the weaker sex.

'Perhaps I, Lord Edgar, should have thought the honour too dearly bought if I had known that it involved my acceptance of a self-appointed keeper of my conscience.'

Our host, Sir Wilfrid Speke, now interfered to calm the passions which were rapidly getting the better of us, and thrusting my gun under my arm, he literally carried me off, and marching me to a covert on the slope of a hill where was a noted 'warm corner,' he told me good-humouredly to 'let the birds have it,' and left me to myself and them.

I was in a very bad temper. Enraged by the recollection of Helen's simpering coldness, by her brother's recently-assumed dictatorship, and by my own reckless want of

self-control a few minutes before, I was not in the mood for sport. Was this to be the result of my determination to take life more seriously, that I discovered my *fiancée* to be a fool, my most honoured friend a bore, and myself capable of undreamt-of depths of bad taste and ill-temper? I would go back to my old life of languid chatter and irresponsible dissipation, I would content myself again with my fame as the 'handsomest man in town,' would accept my future wife for what she was, and not for what she ought to be, give her the inane, half-hearted attentions which were so much more to her taste than earnestness and devotion, and see thought and Lord Edgar at the devil.

I felt much more inclined to shoot myself than to open fire on the pheasants, but headong carelessness, and not tragic intention, caused the accident which ensued. In getting through a gap in a hedge, my gun was

caught by a briar as I mounted to the higher ground on the other side; I tried to free it, and handling it incautiously, a sudden shock to my face and right shoulder told me that I had shot myself. I was blinded for the moment, and trying to raise my right arm I felt acute pain, and the next instant I felt the warm blood trickling down my neck.

I tried to walk, but I staggered about and could make no progress, so I leaned against a tree and shouted; but my head growing dizzy, I soon found myself on the ground, filled with one wish—that I might live long enough for some one to find me, and receive the last instructions by which I could atone to pretty Helen for the vulgar earnestness of my love.

My next recollection is of a dull murmur of voices heard, as it seemed, in the distance, then of pain grown suddenly more acute as I was moved; all the time I could see

nothing, and I had only just time to understand that I was being carried along by friends whose voices I recognised, when I fell again into unconsciousness.

I recovered to find myself back at Sir Wilfrid's ; a doctor was dressing my wounded head and examining my shoulder ; there was a bandage across my eyes, and on trying to speak I found that the right side of my face was also bound up. I passed the night in some pain, and must have been for part of it light-headed, as I discovered two or three days later, when Edgar, much moved, told me that I had implored everybody who came near me to witness that I left all I possessed to Lady Helen Normanton, and had begged for the pen and paper I could not have used, to execute my proposed will.

During the next few days Edgar hardly left my bedside. My head and eyes were still kept tightly bandaged, so that I could

neither see nor speak, nor take solid food. Seeing me in this piteous condition, Edgar, like the good fellow he was, decided that sermons were out of season, and that I must be amused. His humour, however, being of a somewhat slow and cumbrous kind adapted to his size, I took advantage of my enforced silence to let him joke on unheeded, while my own thoughts wandered dreamily away to my life of the past few years, and to the odd, quickly discovered mistake in which it had lately culminated. I was surprised by the persistency with which Helen's placid silliness tormented me, fresh instances of it coming every hour into my mind until I began to ask myself whether the little blue-eyed lady had really been born into the world with a soul at all. And so, no longer suffering bodily pain, I lay day after day, very much absorbed by my own self-questionings, and by strange dreams of a

new Helen, who came to me with the fair face and soft eyes of the old, but with bright intelligence in her gaze, whispering with her delicate lips words of love and tenderness.

I woke up suddenly one night, still hot with my sleeping fancy that this revised edition of my *fiancée* had been with me. I had seemed to feel her breath upon my cheek, even to feel the touch of her lips upon my ear, as she told me my illness had taught her how much she loved me. I thought I was answering her in passionate words with a great thrill of joy in my heart, when I woke up and found myself as usual in darkness and silence.

'Edgar!' I called out; 'Edgar!'

He answered sleepily from a little way off, 'Yes. Do you want anything?'

'No, thank you.'

A pause.

'I say,' I went on a few moments later,

'nobody has been in the room, have they?'

'No, no-o-body,' with a yawn. 'At least, I may have dozed, but I don't think——'

'No, of course not.' But I was horribly wide awake by this time. Some of the bandages round my head having been removed for the first time the evening before, I had liberty of speech again, of which I seemed resolved to make the most. 'I say, Edgar, there's a fire flickering in the grate, isn't there?'

'Yes, why?'

'Well, if I can see that quite well, why on earth do they still keep the bandages over my eyes? I know they were afraid of my going blind. But I haven't; so what's it for?'

'I don't know,' mumbled Edgar, rather blankly. He added hastily, 'I suppose the doctor knows best; you'd better leave them alone.'

'Oh yes.'

A long silence, during which Edgar, under the impression that it was part of a sick nurse's duty when the patient showed signs of restlessness, pottered about the room, and at last fell over something.

'I say, Edgar,' I began again, 'isn't my face a good deal battered about on the right side?'

I heard him stop, and there was a little clash of glasses. Then he spoke, with some constraint.

'Yes, a little. I daresay it will be some time before it gets all right. But you've no internal injuries or broken bones, and that's the great thing.'

The last statement was made so effusively that it was not difficult for me to gather that my face was more deeply injured than he liked to admit.

'I know quite well,' said I composedly,

'that I shall have to swell the proud ranks of the plain after this; I must cultivate my intellect and my virtues, like the poor girls whom we don't dance with! I've lost a finger, too, haven't I? On my right hand?'

'Only two joints of it,' answered Edgar, with laboured cheerfulness.

'What would poor Helen say to me if she could see me now?' I suggested, rather diffidently.

'Say! Why, what every true woman would say, that she loved you ten times better now you were disfigured than she did when you were the counterpart of every other good-looking popinjay in town!'

This, uttered with much ponderous vehemence, was by no means reassuring to me. In the first place, it confirmed the idea that my injuries would leave permanent marks. In the second place, it led me to ask myself whether, Helen's chief merit in my eyes

having been good looks, my chief merit in her eyes might not have been the same.

As I said nothing, Edgar, now fully awake, came nearer to the bed, and said solemnly: 'You do Helen injustice, Harry.'

'And you taught me to do her injustice, Edgar.'

At first he said nothing to this, and I knew that he understood me. But presently I felt his hand laid emphatically on my left shoulder, and he began in a low earnest voice: 'Look here, old chap, that's not quite fair. I may have inveighed against the intellectual inferiority of women scores of times when you encouraged me by feeble protest. I may have spoken of my own sister as an example of the sweet and silly. When you saw her and became infatuated about her I listened to your rhapsodies in silence because I couldn't endorse your opinion that she was an angel. But I was glad you had taken a fancy to the

child, and I knew that you might have done much worse. Well, my opinions have undergone no transformation. The women of the middle class, whom it is now the fashion to educate, the women of the lower class, who have to work, may be considered as reasoning creatures, varying, as men do, in their reasoning powers. But the women of the upper classes, *pur sang*, who are equally above education and labour, may be ranked all together, with the exception of those whom alliance with the class below has regenerated, as more or less fascinating idiots, whose minds are cramped by unnatural and ignorant prejudices, and in whom an occasional ray of intelligence disperses itself in mere freaks of art, of philanthropy, or of religion.'

'Then, if you are logical, you may end by marrying a barmaid.'

'I think not. Barmaids are young women who, by the exacting demands of their call-

ing, are bound to be healthy, active, intelligent and shrewd. Consider how such a woman would be thrown away in the ridiculous and empty existence led by our wives! How she would laugh at the shallow interests of the women around her, and despise her do-nothing husband! Without counting that she might be demoralised by her new position, and add the mistakes of a parvenue to the foibles of the class into which she was admitted!'

'Then, on the whole, you will——'

'Remain single, or take for wife the usual fool of my own class, who will have the usual fool of her own class for a husband.'

'But, Edgar,' said I, after a short pause, 'I am not so calm as you are, and my mind is less well-regulated than yours. I want something in my wife that you would not want from yours. The docile acceptance of my love would never content me; I want it returned.'

But this view of the case had the effect of irritating Edgar, who naturally resented the idea of any other nature having deeper needs than his own.

'It is unreasonable to expect, from our physical and mental inferior, powers equal to our own,' he said, in a tone of dismissal of the subject.

'Then how am I to expect from Helen the power of looking at my disfigured face without horror, when I am by no means sure that I could have felt redoubled devotion if a similar accident had happened to her?'

'Women are different from us, and not to be judged by the same rules. Beauty—of some sort—is a duty with them, while every one knows that an ugly man makes quicker progress with them than a handsome one.'

'Well, I should like to judge what sort of progress with them my ugliness is likely to make. Give me a looking-glass.'

But he would not. He said the doctor had forbidden me to use my eyes yet, that my face was still unhealed, and the bandages must not be moved. And finally he declined to talk to me any longer, and told me to go to sleep.

I was not satisfied. I knew that I was getting well fast, that there was no need to keep me in bed, and I felt curious as to the reason of my still being kept so close a prisoner. So I found an opportunity when I had been left, as they thought, asleep, to remove the bandage from my eyes with my left hand. My sight seemed as good as ever, but the skin round about my right eye seemed to be tightly drawn. The window-blinds were down, and as evening was coming on there was only light enough to distinguish dimly the objects in the room by the help of the flickering flame of the fire. I got out of bed and walked to the toilet-table, but the look-

ing-glass had been taken away; to the mantelpiece, with the same result. I grew impatient, angry, and rather anxious. There was a hand-glass in my dressing-bag, if I could only find that; I remembered that I had left it in the dressing-room. I dashed into the room, and as that, too, was darkened, I turned to draw up the blind. By that movement I came face to face with a sight so appalling that, of all the misfortunes my accident has ever brought upon me, none, I think, has given me a shock for the first moment so horrible. I saw before me the figure of a man with the face of a devil.

The right eyebrow, the right side of the moustache were gone, and the hair as far as the back of the right ear. The whole of this side of the face, from forehead to chin, was a puckered drawn mass of blackened shrivelled skin, distorted into grotesque seams and furrows. The right end of the eye and the right

corner of the mouth were drawn up, giving to the whole face a sinister and evil expression.

After a few moments' contemplation of my new self, I turned away from the glass, feeling sick with disgust and horror. In the first shock of my discovery, no reflection that I was looking upon the fearful sight at its worst, and that the healing work was still going on underneath the scarred and desiccated skin, came to console me.

My back turned upon my own image, my stupefaction gave place to rapid thought. I saw in a moment that the old course of my life was at one blow broken up, that I must begin again as if I had been born that day. I must go away, not only from my own friends, but from the chance of coming in contact with them again. I must leave England. Also, since if I were to make my resolution known I should be inundated with kindly meant dissuasions, I must breathe no hint of

my intention until I was quite able to carry it into execution. I was sure that no one but the doctor, and perhaps Edgar, had seen my face in its present condition, and that no description could give to others any idea of its appearance. I felt that my bodily health and strength were all that they had ever been, and that nothing but the wish to keep the knowledge of my disfigurement from me as long as possible had prompted the doctor's orders to me to remain in bed and to retain the bandages. It now, too, occurred to me that delay might bring some slight modification of my hideousness, and I resolved to let nature do what little she could, and not to set out on my travels until the mask which now covered one-half my face had fallen off, and disclosed whatever fresh horrors might be underneath. Then I would, without letting any one see my face, start for some German Spa for the benefit of my health ; before

I had been away three months I should be forgotten, and free to wend my way wherever I pleased. This idea, to a man to whom life had begun to present something like a deadlock, was not without charm. Society was a bore, love a delusion; now was the chance to find out what else there was worth learning in life.

I heard Edgar's voice in the distance, and had only time to rush back to bed, put on the bandages round my face, and turn on my side as if asleep, before he came into the room.

CHAPTER III

As I heard Edgar creaking softly about the room, giving the impression, even as I lay with my eyes shut, unable to observe his elaborate movements, of great weight trying to be light, my heart smote me at the thought of deceiving him with the rest. 'The elephant,' it had been a joke between ourselves for me to call him; and like a great elephant he was, huge, intelligent, gentle, not without a certain massive beauty, with keen feelings of loyalty, and a long slow-smouldering memory, with inclinations towards a laborious and somewhat painful sportiveness. Rebel against his sententious homilies as I

occasionally might, he was a good old fellow, and I was fond of him. I moved a little to show him I was awake, and then said:

'Hallo, Edgar, is that you?'

'Yes. How do you feel?'

'Oh, ever so much better. I shall be getting up soon now.'

'Well, you mustn't be in too great a hurry. You have been patient so long, it would be a pity to destroy your credit just at the last.'

'I am only waiting for my face to heal now, of course. But, I say, Edgar, it will take a long time for that to get all right. Why, part of my cheek was completely blown away. It will be months, at least, before I dare show myself. I think I shall go to some German baths, and, you know, I don't know how long I may have to stay there. In the meantime——'

'In the meantime, what?'

'Your sister—Helen—must know that she is free.'

'But supposing she doesn't want to be free? Supposing——'

'Supposing she has a fancy for being tied to a death's-head? No, Edgar, she must be released at once. I want you to write a letter from me to her, if you will. The sooner it is over the better for both of us.'

I suppose Edgar felt that my attitude was not one of pure resignation, for he made no further effort to dissuade me, but went instantly in search of pens and paper. He was so very submissive, however, in taking this step, which I knew to be distasteful to him, that I was quite sure, before the letter was half written, that he was 'up to' something. So, when it was finished, I was mean enough to insist on his leaving it with me, together with the directed envelope; and after reading it carefully through myself

as soon as I was alone, I made the housekeeper fold it and seal it up in my presence, and directed her to get it posted at once.

The letter said :

'My Dearest Helen—You have no doubt long ago heard the reason of my silence, and forgiven me for it, I am sure. I am sorry to tell you that my head [I felt an odd shyness of saying "my face"] has been injured so seriously that it will be a long time before I can return to town ; I am going straight to Germany as soon as I am able to leave here, and cannot yet tell when I shall be in England again. Under these circumstances, although I know that you would overlook my new imperfections with the same sweetness with which you have forgiven my older defects, I feel that I cannot impose again upon your generosity. I therefore set you free, begging you to do me one last kindness by not returning to me the little souvenirs that you have from time to time been good enough to accept from me. And please don't send me back my letters, if you have ever received them with any pleasure. Burn them if you like. I will send back yours if

you wish ; but, as no woman will ever look with love upon my face again, your womanly dignity will suffer but little if you let me still keep them. There are only eight of them. And there is a glove, of course, and a packet of dried flowers, of course, and the little silver match-box. All these I shall insist upon keeping, whether you like it or not. They could not compromise anybody ; the little glove could pass for a child's. You will trust me with them all, will you not? You see this isn't the usual broken-off match with its prelude of disastrous squabbles and wrangles. Some jealous demon who saw I did not deserve my good fortune has broken my hopes of happiness abruptly, and released you from a chain which I am afraid my ill-temper had already begun to make irksome to you. Forgive me now, and bear as kindly a recollection of me as you can. God bless you, Helen. I shall always treasure the remembrance of your little fairy face, and remember gratefully your sweet forbearance with me.—Yours most sincerely and affectionately,

'HENRY LYTTLETON MAUDE.'

I hoped the child would not think this

letter too cold and formal. My heart yearned towards her now with a longing more tender than before; I felt oppressed by the necessity of foregoing the shallow little love which, as the handsomest man about town, I had begun to consider far beneath my deserts.

Two days later I received an answer from Helen. I waited until I was alone to read it, for I still guarded my face carefully from all eyes but the doctor's. The touch of the letter, the sight of the sprawling, slap-dash handwriting which it delighted Helen to assume, in common with the other young ladies of her generation, moved me; for I could not but feel that this was the last '*billet*' by any possibility to be called '*doux*' which I should ever receive. I opened it with an apprehension that I should find the contents less moving than the envelope. I was mistaken.

'My Dearest Harry—I am afraid you have a very poor opinion of me if you think I care for nothing but personal attractions. You have always been most kind and generous to me, and you need not think because I am not intellectual myself I do not care for a man who is intellectual and all those things. I am coming down to see you myself and then if you wish to give me up you can do so—but I hope you will not throw me over so hastily. I am so sorry for your accident and that it has made you so ill, but I do not mind what else it has done.—Believe me, dearest Harry, with best love, hoping you will soon be quite recovered, yours ever lovingly,

'Helen.'

Childish as the letter was it touched me deeply. Edgar must be right after all; I had misjudged a simple but loyal nature that only wanted an emergency to bring its nobler qualities to the surface. I told him about the letter, and added that it made giving her up harder to bear.

'Why should you give her up?' said he

eagerly. 'You see she herself will not hear of it.'

'Because she does not understand the case. I am disfigured past recognition; she would shrink with horror from the sight of me. It would be a shock even to you, a strong unromantic man, to see what I have become.'

'You are too sensitive, old fellow. However shocking the change in you may be, you cannot fail to exaggerate its effect on others.'

'We shall see.'

A few days later, when the horror of my new appearance was indeed a little mitigated by the falling off of the withered outer skin which had covered the right side of my face, I tried the effect of my striking physiognomy on Edgar.

Whether he had expected some such surprise, or whether he was endowed with

a splendid insensibility to ugliness, he stood the shock with the most stolid placidity.

'Well?' said I defiantly, looking at him from out my ill-matched eyes in a passion of aggressive rage.

'Well?' said he, as complacently as if I had been a turnip.

'I hope you admire this style of beauty,' I hurled out savagely.

'I don't go quite so far as that, but it's really much better than I expected.'

'You are easily pleased.'

He went on quietly. 'The chief impression your countenance gives one now is not, as you flatter yourself, of consummate ugliness, but—forgive me—of consummate villainy.'

'What!'

'You are preserved for ever from the danger of being anything but strictly virtuous and straightforward in your dealings,

for no one would trust the possessor of that countenance with either a secret or a sovereign.'

This blunt frankness acted better than any softer measures could have done; it made me laugh. Looking again at myself in a glass, for I was now up and dressed, I noticed, what had escaped me before in my paralysed contemplation of the change in my own features, that the drawing up of the right-hand corners of my mouth and eye, together with the removal of every vestige of hair from that side of the face, had given me the grotesquely repulsive leer of a satyr. To crown my disadvantages, the left side of my face, seen in profile, still retained its natural appearance to mock my new hideousness.

'But I think I see a way out of all difficulties,' Edgar went on, more seriously. 'You will advance objections, I know, but

you must permit your objections to be overruled. Accident can be combated by artifice, and to artifice you must resort until nature does her work and relieves you from the new necessity.'

We fought out the question, and at last I very unwillingly gave way, and submitted to the adoption of a false eyebrow, a false moustache, and a beautiful tuft of curly false hair much superior to my own, to hide the bald patch left by the accident.

Rather elated by this distinct improvement, assumed for the reception of Helen's promised visit, and encouraged by assurances that my own hair would soon grow again and enable me to discard its substitutes, I was ready to believe that the discoloration and disfigurement still visible were comparatively unimportant, and that the repellent expression, which no artifice much abated, might indeed affect strangers,

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but would not, in the sight of my friends, obscure their long-established impression of my amiability and sweetness.

Sir Wilfrid and Lady Speke had by this time gone up to town, leaving the place, with many kind wishes for my early and complete recovery, entirely at the disposal of myself and my unwearied nurse Edgar. So a day was fixed for the arrival of Helen and her mother. On that eventful afternoon Edgar settled me in a small sitting-room on the same floor with the room I had been occupying, before starting for the station. The blinds were drawn, and I sat with my back to this carefully-softened light. I wished, now that the ordeal was getting so near, that I had not let myself be dissuaded from my intention of sneaking quietly away without showing my disfigured face to any one. What was the use of my seeing the child again? I did indeed long foolishly for

a few last words with her since she had shown unexpected depth of feeling towards me in my misfortune; but it could not end, as Edgar still obstinately hoped, in a renewal of our engagement, which I persisted in regarding as definitely broken. The meeting was only for a farewell. I was ashamed of the artifices I had used to conceal the traces of my accident, and I was feeling half inclined to tear off my false ornaments and present myself in my true hideousness, when the arrival of my visitors luckily stopped me. The room where I sat was at the back of the house, so that I had no warning of the return of the carriage until I heard Edgar's voice. I sprang up with one last look of agony at my reflection in the glass, which seemed to me at that moment a ghastly caricature of my old self, and then sat nervously down again, feeling like a doomed wretch with the executioner outside his cell.

The door opened, and Edgar bounded up to me, dragging Helen, who seemed shy and nervous, forward on his arm.

'Here he is, Nellie. Getting well fast, you see. Where is mother? I must fetch her up.'

I saw in a moment through the dear clumsy fellow's manœuvres. He prided himself on his strategy, fancying he had only to leave us together for us to have a touching reconciliation. But I knew better. I saw her turn pale and cling to her brother's arm, and I said hastily—

'No, no. Lady Castleford is not far behind, you may be sure. I am glad to see you, Lady Helen; it is very kind of you to come. It is easier——'

'Helen has come to persuade you to get well in England among your friends instead of going abroad to be ill among strangers,' said Edgar, cutting me short. 'He's getting

on well, isn't he, Helen? Come, he's well enough to have his hand shaken now.'

He drew her forward, to my inexpressible pain, for I saw the reluctance in her face. Before I could attempt a protest, a reassuring word, she had held out her hand, which I timidly took. Then she lifted her eyes to my face for the first time. For the first and last time I saw the expression of the most vivid, most acute emotion on the fairy face. The muscles were contracted, the pupils of the eyes were dilated with intense horror.

'I am very glad——' she began.

Then, before she could finish her sentence, even while I still held her little hand in mine, she fell like a crushed flower unconscious in her brother's arms.

Poor fellow! How contrite, how miserably, abjectly humble and despairing he was when he appeared later in my room, to which I had fled, like a wounded beast to its den,

when little Helen's unwilling blow gave me my social death-warrant. I was able to laugh then, and to tell him truly that my only regret was for the pain the injudicious meeting had caused poor Helen.

'It was you who dictated her letter to me,' I said.

Edgar did not attempt to deny it.

'She ought to be ashamed of herself,' said he, reddening with indignation.

'No, we ought to be ashamed of ourselves. I for my vanity in thinking there was any charm in my dull personality to compensate for the loss of the only merit I could have in a girl's eyes; you for your generous idiotcy in carrying that mistake farther still. Are they gone?'

'Yes. My mother wanted to see you, but——'

'That's all right. And now, old fellow, you mustn't make any more blunders on my

account; you must let me make my own. I leave England in a few days.'

'Well, I suppose you must do as you like. I'll come and see you off.'

'No,' said I firmly. 'I shall say good-bye to you here, Edgar. I have very particular reasons for it, and you must give way to me in this.'

He tried to change my mind; he wanted to know my reasons; but he was unsuccessful in both attempts. I knew how obstinate he was, and that if I once allowed him to go with me to town, he would be sure to subject me to more painful meetings in the endeavour to persuade me to remain in England. Luckily for me, the very next day the Marquis telegraphed to his son to join him immediately in Monmouthshire; and no sooner had Edgar left the house, with the sure knowledge that he should not see me again, than I fulfilled his fears by instant preparation for my own

departure. I had discarded all disguises, and contented myself by masking my face as much as possible with a travelling cap and a muffler; on arriving in town I went to an hotel in Covent Garden, where I was not known, and by the evening of the following day I had provided myself with the outfit of a Transpontine villain, a low-crowned, wide-brimmed soft hat and a black Spanish cloak.

In this get-up, which, when not made too conspicuous by a stage-walk and melodramatic glances around, is really a very efficient disguise both of form and features, I knew myself to be quite safe from recognition anywhere, and having decided to start from Charing Cross for Cologne by way of Ostend on the following morning, I devoted the evening of my second day in town to a last look round.

CHAPTER IV

It was Saturday evening; a week of fog having been succeeded by a week of rain, the pavements were now well coated with black slimy mud, in which one kept one's footing as best one could, stimulated by plentiful showers of the same substance, in a still more fluid state, flung by the wheels of passing vehicles.

Oh, wisely-governed city, where there is work for thousands of starving men, while thousands of men are starving for want of work! If a boy can keep a crossing clean in a crowded thoroughfare, could not an organised gang of men, ten times as numerous and

twice as active as our gentle scavengers, save the sacred boots, skirts, and trousers of the respectable classes from that brush-resisting abomination, London mud? I respectfully recommend this suggestion to my betters with the assurance that, if it is considered of any value, there are plenty more where that came from.

Starting from Covent Garden, I made my way through King Street, Garrick Street, Cranbourne Street, Leicester Square and Coventry Street, into Regent Street, and was struck by a hundred common London sights and incidents which, in the old days, when my own life was so idle and yet so absorbing, had entirely escaped my notice. Oxford Street, Bond Street, Piccadilly, St. James's Street, I made the tour of them all; past the clubs, of many of which I was a member, brushing, unrecognised, by a dozen men who had known me well, into Trafalgar Square,

where the gas-lamps cast long glittering lines of light on the wet pavement, and the spire of St. Martin's and the dome of the National Gallery rose like gray shadow-palaces above in the rainy air.

I dined at a restaurant in the Strand, and then, growing confident in the security of my disguise, I thought I would take a farewell glance at an old chum who had run Edgar pretty close in my esteem. He was an actor, and was fulfilling an engagement at a theatre in the Strand. When I add that he played what are technically called 'juvenile' parts —that is to say, those of the stage lovers— my taste may seem strange, until I explain that Fabian Scott was the very worst of all the fashionable 'juveniles,' being addicted to literary and artistic pursuits and other intellectual exercises which, while permissible and innocuous to what are called 'character' actors, are ruin to 'juveniles,' whose business

requires vigour rather than thought, picturesqueness rather than feeling. So that Fabian, with his thin keen face, his intensity, and some remnant of North-country stiffness, stood only in the second rank of those whom the ladies delighted to worship; and becoming neither a great artist nor a great popinjay, gave his friends a sense of not having done quite the best with himself, but was a very interesting, if somewhat excitable companion. For my own part I had then, not knowing how vitally important the question of his character would one day become to me, nothing to wish for in him save that he were a little less sour and a little more sincere.

The stage-door was up a narrow and dirty court leading from the Strand. At the opening of the court stood a stout fair man, who looked like a German, and whose coarse, swollen face and dull eyes bore witness to a life of low dissipation. He was respectably

but not well dressed, and he swung the cheap and showy walking-stick in his hand slowly backwards and forwards, in a stolidly swaggering and aggressive manner. I should not have noticed him so particularly, but for the fact that he filled the narrow entrance to the passage so completely that I had to ask him to let me pass. Instead of immediately complying, he looked at me from my feet to my head with surly, half-tipsy insolence, and gave a short thick laugh.

'Oh, so you're one of the swells, I suppose, who come hanging round stage-doors to tempt hard-working respectable women away from their lawful husbands! But it won't do. I tell you it won't do!'

I pushed him aside with one vigorous thrust and went up the court, followed by the outraged gentleman, who made no attempt to molest me except by a torrent of abusive eloquence, from which I gathered that he

was the husband of one of the actresses at the theatre, and that she did not appreciate the virtues of her lord and master as he considered she ought, but that, nevertheless, he persisted in affording her the protection of his manly arm, and would do so in spite of all the d——d 'mashers' in London.

At this point the stage-doorkeeper came out of his little box, and informed the angry gentleman that if he went on disgracing the place by his scandalous conduct his wife's services would be dispensed with; 'and if there's no money for her to earn, there'll be no beer for you to drink, Mr. Ellmer,' continued the little old man, with more point than politeness.

The threat had instant effect. Mr. Ellmer subsided into indignant mumbling, and went down the court again.

I had forgotten myself in interest at the rout of Mr. Ellmer, to whom I had taken a

rabid dislike, and was standing in the full, if feeble light of the gas over the stage-door, when an inner door was thrust open, and the next moment Fabian Scott was shaking my hand heartily.

'Hallo, Harry! I am glad to see you again. I was afraid you were going away without a word to your old friends; but you were always better than your reputation. Got over your accident all right—eh?'

'As well as could be expected, I suppose. I start for Germany to-morrow.'

'Ah!' By this one exclamation he signified that he understood the case, and knew that my mind was definitely made up. Actors are men of the world, and I felt the relief of talking to him after the stolid and obstinate misapprehension with which dear old Edgar persisted in meeting my reasons for saying good-bye to society. 'It was good of you not to go without coming here,' he went on,

appreciating the fact that my visit must have entailed an effort.

'To tell the truth, I meant to see you without your seeing me; but I got interested in a moral victory just obtained by your door-keeper over an eloquent visitor, and so you caught me.'

Scott glanced at the swaggering Ellmer.

'Drunken brute!' said he, with much disgust. 'His wife—a hard-working little woman, who acts under the name of Miss Bailey—has had to bring her child to the theatre with her to-night, for fear he should get home before her and frighten the poor little thing. Look! here they come. One wonders how a wild beast can be the father of an angel.'

Scott was an ardent worshipper of beauty; but I, a cooler mortal, could not think his raptures excessive when he stood aside to make way for a slim, pale, pretty woman, to

whose hand there clung a child so beautiful that my whole heart revolted at the thought that the tipsy ruffian a few paces off was her father. Both mother and child were shabbily dressed, in clothes which gave one the idea that November had overtaken them before they could afford to replace the garments of July. The little one was about eight years old, a slender creature with a flower-like face, round which, from under a home-made red velvet cap, her light-brown hair fell in a naturally curly tangle. Something in her blue eyes reminded me of the childlike charm of Helen's. Scott stopped them to say good-night, effusively addressing the child as his little sweetheart, and telling her that if the boy who gave her an apple last Sunday gave her another the next day, he should find out where he lived and murder that boy.

'Beware, Babiole, of arousing the jealousy

of a desperate man,' he ended, folding his arms and tossing back his head.

The child took his outburst quite seriously.

'If he offers me another apple I must take it,' she answered in a sweet demure little voice. 'It would be rude to refuse. But you needn't be angry, for I can like you too.'

'Like me *too!*' thundered Scott, with melodramatic gestures. 'Heaven and earth! This is how the girl dares to trifle with the fiercest passion that ever surged in a human breast!'

'If you're fierce I shan't like you,' said the little one, in her measured way. 'Papa's fierce, and he frightens me and mamma.'

'Will you like me, little madam?' I ventured; and, knowing that my disfigured face was well concealed, I held out my hand. 'I will love you very gently.'

I made my voice as soft as I could, but the deep tones or the sombre black figure

frightened her. The quaint matronly demeanour suddenly gave way to a child's fright, and she hid her face in the folds of her mother's black cloth jacket. Then mamma began to rebuke in a voice and manner oddly like the child's; and Fabian seized Babiole and lifted her up to kiss her.

'And now will you give me a kiss?' said he to her.

'Yes, Mr. Scott.' She gave him a kiss with the same demure simplicity.

'And will you promise to kiss nobody but me till you see me again?'

'Really, Mr. Scott,' interrupted the mother rather tartly, 'you shouldn't put such ideas into the child's head. They'll come quite soon enough of their own accord.'

She had one eye upon her husband, who was waiting farther down the court; and the wifely desire to be 'at him' seemed to put a

little extra vinegar into her tone. With a hasty good-night to Fabian, and a frosty little bow to the unknown black figure, she said, 'Come, Babiole,' and hurried away with the child.

Scott put his arm through mine, and we followed them slowly back into the Strand, where, amidst the throng of people who had just poured out of the theatres, we soon lost sight of them. We did not go far together, for Fabian had an appointment to supper; but before we parted, he, more ready-witted than Edgar, had talked me into a promise that, when the summer came round and he had a chance of a holiday, I would let him know where I was, that he might invite himself to come and see me.

'You don't think I shall come back among you again, then?' I said curiously.

'I don't know. The taste for wandering, like all other tastes, grows with indulgence.

Good-bye, Harry, and God bless you wherever you go.'

I wrung his hand, scarcely able to speak. His words were a prophecy, I knew; and at the moment of taking this last outsider's look at the scenes of my old life, it seemed to me that a dungeon-door had swung to on youth and hope and happiness, shutting me in for ever to a very lonely solitude.

'Good-bye, good-bye, Fabian,' said I, and I walked hastily away lest I should keep on wringing his hand all night.

For three hours more I walked about the London streets, unable to tear myself away from them, sneaking again past the clubs, with a feeling of gushing affection towards a score of idiotic young men and prosy old ones who passed me on the pavement on their way in or out, devoured by a longing to exchange if only half a dozen words with men whom I had often avoided as bores. Near

the steps of the Carlton I did try to address one quiet old gentleman whom, on account of his rapacity for papers, I had cordially hated. A ridiculous shyness made me hoarse; and on hearing a husky voice close to his ears in almost apologetic tones, he started violently, cried, 'Eh, what? No, no! Here—hansom!' and I retreated like one of the damned.

I got into Grosvenor Square, passed through a throng of carriages, and saw the bright lights in a house where they were giving a birthday dance to which I had been specially invited months before. Helen would be there, I knew; I felt a jealous satisfaction in remembering that old Saxmundham was away, nursing his gout at Torquay. What of that? There were plenty of other men to step into my shoes. At first I thought I would stay, and walk up and down the square for the chance of one

more look at her. How well I knew how she would come down the steps, in a timid hesitating way, half-dazzled by the lights she had just left, poising each little dainty foot a moment above the next step, flit into the carriage like a soft white bird, and drop her pretty head back with a sigh, 'Oh, I'm so tired, mamma!' her white throat curved gently above the swansdown of her cloak, the golden fringe of curls falling limply almost to her eyebrows. I must wait—I must see her again! What! On the arm of another man! The blood rushed into my head as these incoherent thoughts rose rapidly in my mind; all the passions of my life, of my youth, dammed up as they had suddenly been by my accident and its fatal consequences, seemed to surge up, break through the barriers of resignation and resolve, and make a madman of me. I was not master of myself, I could not count upon

what I should do if I saw her; seeing my way no more than if I had been blind or intoxicated, I turned away, and finding myself presently in silent Bond Street, I got into a hansom and went back to my hotel.

I fancied that night that sooner or later I should end by suicide; but in the morning I had to pack, to buy things for my journey, and to set out on my travels. The worst wrench was over; before I had left England a week, I was almost a philosopher.

For five years I lived a wanderer's life, and found it fairly to my liking. I hunted the boar in Germany, the wolf in France, went salmon-fishing in Norway, shot two tigers in India; got as far as California in search of adventures, of which I had plenty; passed a fortnight with Red Indians, whom on the whole I prefer in pictures; and began to acquire a distaste for civilisation, mitigated

by enjoyment of meetings once a year with Edgar and Fabian Scott.

I retained the lease of a shooting-box and of a few miles of deer-forest by the Dee-side, between Ballater and picturesque little Loch Muick. Larkhall, as the house was called, became, therefore, our yearly rendezvous. On our second meeting, the party was increased by a new member, Mr. William Fussell, a gentleman who was 'something in the City.' I never could quite make out what that something was, but it must have been some exceedingly pleasant and lucrative profession, since Mr. Fussell, while constantly describing himself as one of the unlucky ones, was always in spirits high, not to say rollicking, and was gifted with powers of enjoyment which could only be the result of long and assiduous practice. I had met him at a German hotel, where I had been struck by the magnificent insolence of his assertion that

he had acquired a thorough command of the German language in three weeks, and by the astonishing measure of success which attended his daring plunges into that tongue. He was serenely jolly, selfish, and sociable, pathetically complaining of his wife's conduct in letting him come away for his holiday by himself, and enjoying himself very much without her. He was so envious of my good fortune when I said that I was going boar-hunting, that I invited him to accompany me; and as he showed much pluck in a rather nasty encounter we had with an infuriated boar, and much frankness in owning afterwards that he was frightened, I forthwith invited him to Scotland, and he accepted the invitation, as he did all good things which came in his way, with avidity.

At the third of our yearly meetings a fifth and last member joined us. This was a clever young Irishman, of good family, small

fortune, sickly body, and still sicklier mind, to whom accident had put me under a small obligation, which I was glad to repay by enabling him to visit the Highlands, to which his doctor had prescribed a visit. He had been making an exhaustive and strictly philosophical inquiry into the iniquities of Paris, in the corruption of which he appeared to revel; indeed, he was clever enough to find so much depravity in every spot he had visited, that I wondered what repulsive view he would be able to take of our sweet-scented fir-forests, and the long miles of the rippling winding Dee; or whether, in the absence of labyrinthine mazes of dirt and disease, vice and crime to explore and minutely expose, he would pine and die.

Except these two, I had, during those five years of wandering, made no new friend. My appalling ugliness, mitigated as it was by time, had, together with the reserve it

taught me, to a great degree isolated me. But perfect independence has its pleasures, and I was not an unhappy man. Until the end of the fourth year I had not even a servant, and I avoided all women; at that point, however, I yielded to the fatal human weakness of attaching to one's self some fellow-creature, and engaged as my personal attendant a cosmopolitan individual, whose qualifications for the post consisted in the fact that he had been a lawyer's clerk in England, a cow-boy in Mexico, had had charge of a lunatic at Naples, and was a deserter from the Austrian army. Plain to begin with, deeply marked with smallpox, and disfigured by a sabre-cut across the nose, he was even uglier than I, a fact which seemed, from the frequency with which he alluded to it, to gratify him as much as it did me. His name was John Ferguson, but it did not occur to me to connect his name with

his origin until the time came to prepare for my fifth annual visit to Scotland.

'I should have thought one plain countenance about you was enough, sir, without your wanting to see them at every turn,' he said ill-temperedly, when told to pack up.

'I suppose you come from Auld Reekie yourself, then, since you're so reluctant to go back to it?'

'Well, sir, and where's the harm of being born there, provided you get away from it as early as you can, and never go back to it till you can help!'

'Why, Ferguson, that's spoken like a true patriot.'

'Indeed, sir, I hope I am wise enough not to hold a place the better for having produced such a poor creature as myself,' said John, who could always give a good account of himself in an argument.

But once established at Larkhall, Fergu-

son found himself so comfortable that, at the end of the fortnight's visit of my friends, he again made objection to packing up, which I was in the mood to listen to indulgently.

'It seems a pity like to leave the place till the shooting season's over, don't it, sir?' he hazarded one morning.

'Yes, Ferguson, perhaps it does.'

'The Continent wouldn't run away if it was left to look after itself a few weeks longer, would it, sir?' he went on.

'No, Ferguson, perhaps it wouldn't,' said I.

'Shall I leave the packing till to-morrow, sir?' he then asked.

'Well, yes, I think you may.'

From which it is clear that Ferguson had already been shrewd enough to assume a proper authority over his nominal master.

I had become a little weary of wandering, and although I by no means intended to give

up the nomadic life which I had led for five years, I thought a couple of months' rest would be a pleasant change; I could be on the move before the cold weather set in. But September passed, and October and November came, and it grew very bleak; and still I stayed on, finding a new pleasure in the changed aspect of the gaunt hills, in seeing the snow patches grow larger and larger on Lochnagar, in outstaying the last of the late visitors, and in finding a spot where solitude needed no seeking.

The railway runs from Aberdeen to Ballater. One morning, arriving at the little station for my papers, I found a train just starting, and was seized by an impulse to pay a short visit to the granite city. A feeling left by my wandering life made it always difficult for me to see a train or a boat start without me. So I sent a boy to Larkhall with a message to Ferguson, who, with

a lad under him, constituted my entire household, took my ticket and started. It was past five when I reached Aberdeen; after a sharp walk to the brig o' Balgownie and back, I hired a private room at an hotel, and dined by myself. Making inquiries about the theatre, I learnt that the entertainment that week was very poor, and further that it had been so badly patronised that it was doubtful whether the unfortunate players would get their meagre salaries. I was glancing at the yellow bill which advertised *Rob Roy* as a Saturday night attraction, when I read the names of Miss Bailey and Miss Babiole Bailey.

I got up at once and walked quickly down to the little theatre.

CHAPTER V

I REMEMBER very little of the performance that night, except the painful impression produced upon me by the sight of the effort with which a tall spectre-like woman, with sunken hollow face and feeble voice, in whom I with difficulty recognised pretty Mrs. Ellmer, dragged herself through the part of Diana Vernon. Babiole I utterly failed to distinguish. Looking out as I did for my little eight-year old fairy, with gold-brown hair curling naturally in large loose rings over her blue eyes, I could not be expected to know that an awkward sparrow-legged minion of the king, wearing high boots, a

tabard, and a parson's wideawake pinned up and ornamented with a long white feather, was what five years and a limited stage wardrobe had made of the lovely child.

I waited for them at the stage door a long time after the performance was over, saw the rest of the little company come out in twos and threes, one or two depressed and silent, but most of them loudly cursing their manager, the Scotch nation in general, and the people of Aberdeen in particular. Then the manager himself came out with his wife, a buxom lady who had played Helen Macgregor with a good deal of spirit, but who seemed, from the stoical forbearance with which she received the outpourings of her husband's wrath at his ill-luck, to be a disappointingly mild and meek person in private life. 'But what will they do, Bob? I believe the mother's dying,' I heard her protest gently. 'Can't help that. We must

look out for ourselves. And Marie will make a better juvenile at half Miss Bailey's screw,' said her husband gruffly. Last of all came Mrs. Ellmer, thinner and shabbier than ever, leaning on the arm of an overgrown girl a little shorter than herself, whose childishly meagre skirts were in odd contrast with the protecting old-fashioned manner in which she supported her mother, and whispered to her not to cry, they would be all right.

I made myself known rather awkwardly, for when I raised my hat and said, 'Mrs. Ellmer, I think,' they only walked on a little faster. The case was too serious with them, however, for me to allow myself to be easily rebuffed. I followed them with a long and lame speech of introduction.

'Don't you remember—five years ago—in the Strand, when you were acting at the "Vaudeville"—Mr. Fabian Scott?'

Babiole stopped and whispered something; Mrs. Ellmer stopped too, and held out her hand with a wan smile and a sudden change to a rather effusive manner.

'I beg your pardon, I am sure. I remember perfectly, Mr. Scott introduced you to me as a very old friend of his. You will excuse me, won't you? One doesn't expect to see gentlemen from town in these uncivilised parts. Babiole, my dear, you remember Mr.——'

'Maude,' said I. 'It is very good of you to remember me at all, after such a long time. But I couldn't resist the temptation of speaking to you; one sees, as you say, so few beings up here whom one likes to call fellow-creatures. Miss Babiole, you've "growed out of knowledge." I suppose you haven't seen much of our friend Fabian lately, Mrs. Ellmer?'

'No, indeed. I went on tour at the end

of the season when I first had the pleasure of meeting you, and we have been touring ever since.'

'Don't you get tired of the incessant travelling? I suppose you seldom stay more than a week at each place?'

'Sometimes only two or three nights. It is extremely fatiguing. In fact, I am going to take a rest for a short time, for I find the nightly work too much for me in my present state of health,' said she, with a brave attempt to check the tremor in her voice, which was unspeakably piteous to me who knew the true reason of the 'rest.'

'If you are going to stay in Aberdeen, I hope you will allow me to call upon you. I live near Ballater, forty miles away in the country, so you may guess how thankfully I snatch at a chance of seeing a little society.'

At the word 'society' Mrs. Ellmer laughed almost hysterically.

'I am afraid you would find solitude livelier than our society,' she said, with a pitiful attempt to be sprightly.

'Well, will you let me try?'

'Really, Mr. Maude, when we are in the country we live in such a very quiet way. Of course it's different when one is in town and has one's own servants; and these Scotch people have no notion of waiting at table or serving things decently.'

'I know, I know,' I broke in eagerly. 'I'm used to all that myself. Why, I live in a tumble-down old house with a monkey and a soldier for my household, so you may judge that I have got used to the discomforts of the North.'

I saw Babiole stealthily shake her mother's arm, and move her lips in a faint 'Yes, yes,' Reluctantly, and with more excuses for having let the agent-in-advance take lodgings for them which they would not have

looked at had they known what a low neighbourhood they were in, Mrs. Ellmer at last consented that I should call and take tea with them next day.

I went back to my hotel and engaged a room for the night. The poor woman's sunken face haunted me even in my sleep; and I grew nervous when half-past four came, lest I should hear on arriving at the bare and dirty-looking stone house which I had already taken care to find out, that she was dead. However, my fears had run away with me. On my knocking at the door of the top flat of the little house, Babiole opened it, pretty and smiling, in a simple dress of some sort of brown stuff, with lace and a red necklace round her fair slim throat. She had not seen my face before by daylight; and I saw, by the flash of horror that passed quickly over her features and was gone, how much the sight shocked her.

'I was afraid you would forget to come, perhaps,' she said, in the prim little way I remembered, as she led the way into a small room, in which no one less used to the shifts of travel than I was could have detected the ingenious artifices by which a washhand-stand became a sideboard, and a wardrobe a book-case. The popular Scotch plan of sleeping in a cupboard disposed of the bed.

Mrs. Ellmer looked better. Whether influenced by her daughter's keen perception that I was a friend in time of need, or pleasantly excited at the novelty of receiving a visitor, there was more spontaneity than I had expected in her voluble welcome, more brightness in the inevitable renewal of her excuses for the simplicity of their surroundings. To me, after my long exile from everything fair or gentle in the way of womanhood, the bare little room was

luxurious enough with that pretty young creature in it; for Babiole, though she had lost much of her childish beauty, and was rapidly approaching the 'gawky' stage of a tall girl's development, had a softness in her blue eyes when she looked at her mother, which now seemed to me more charming than the keen glance of unusual intellect. She had, too, the natural refinement of all gentle natures, and had had enough stage training to be more graceful than girls of her age generally are. Altogether, she interested me greatly, so that I cast about in my mind for some way of effectually helping them, without destroying all chance of my meeting them soon again.

Babiole brought in the tea herself, while Mrs. Ellmer carefully explained that Mrs. Firth, the landlady, had such odd notions of laying the table and such terribly noisy manners, that, for the sake of her mother's

nerves, Babiole had undertaken this little domestic duty herself. But, from a glimpse I caught later of Mrs. Firth's hands, as she held the kitchen-door to spy at my exit from behind it, I think there may have been stronger reasons for keeping her in the background when an aristocratic and presumably cleanly visitor was about.

Babiole did not talk much, but when, in the course of the evening, I fell to describing Larkhall and the country around it, in deference to poor Mrs. Ellmer's thirsty wish to know more of the rollicking luxury of my bachelor home, the girl's eyes seemed to grow larger with intense interest; and, after a quick glance at my face, which had, I saw, an unspeakable horror for her, she fixed her eyes on the fire, and remained as quiet as a statue while I enlarged on the good qualities of my monkey, my birds, my dog, and the view from my study window of the Muick

just visible now between the bare branches of the birch-trees.

'I should like to live right among the hills like that,' she said softly, when her mother had exhausted her expressions of admiration.

'Would you? You would find it very lonely. In winter you would be snowed up, as I shall most certainly be in a week or two; and even when the roads are passable you don't meet any one on them, except, perhaps, a couple of peasants, whose language would be to you as unintelligible as that of wild animals going down into the village to get food.'

'But you can live there.'

'Circumstances have made me solitary everywhere.'

She looked up at me; her face flushed, her lips trembled with unutterable pity, and the tears sprang to her eyes.

Custom had long since made me callous

to instinctive aversion, but this most unexpected burst of intelligent sympathy made my heart leap up. I said nothing, and began to play with the table-cloth.

Mrs. Ellmer, in the belief that the pause was an awkward one, rushed into the breach, and disturbed my sweet feeling rather uncouthly.

'I am sure, Mr. Maude, no one thinks the worse of you for the accident, whatever it was, that disfigured you. For my part, I always prefer plain men to handsome ones; they're more intelligent, and don't think so much of themselves.'

Babiole gave her mother an alarmed pleading look, which happily absorbed my attention and neutralised the effect of this speech. I could have borne worse things than poor Mrs. Ellmer's rather tactless and insipid conversation for the sake of watching her daughter's mobile little face, and I am

afraid they must have wished me away long before I could make up my mind to go. Babiole came to the outer door with me, and I seized the opportunity to ask her what they were going to do.

'Mrs. Ellmer doesn't look strong enough to act again at present,' I suggested.

The girl's face clouded.

'No. And even if she were, you see——' She stopped.

'Of course. Her place would be filled up?'

'Yes,' very sorrowfully. Then she looked up again, her face grown suddenly bright and hopeful, as with a flash of sunshine. 'But you needn't be afraid for us. Mamma is so clever, and I am young and strong; we shall be all right. We should be all right now if only——'

'If only?'

'Why, you see, you mustn't think it's

mamma's fault that we are left in a corner like this; you don't know how she can save and manage on—oh! so little. But whenever she has, by care and making things do, saved up a little money, it—it all goes, you know.'

The sudden reserve which showed itself in her ingenuous manner towards the last words was so very suggestive that the true explanation of this phenomenon flashed upon my mind.

'Then somebody else puts in a claim,' I suggested.

The girl laughed a little, her full and sensitive red lips opening widely over ivory-white even teeth, and she nodded appreciation of my quick perception.

'Somebody else wants such a lot of things that somebody else's wife and daughter can do without,' she said, with a comical little look of resignation. And, encouraged by

my sympathetic silence, she went on, 'And he has so much talent, Mr. Maude. If he would only go on painting as poor mamma goes on acting, he could make us all rich—if he liked. And instead of that——'

'Babiole!' cried her mother's voice, rather tartly.

'Yes, mamma.' Then she added, low and quickly, with a frightened glance back in the dusk, towards the door of their room, 'It's high treason to say even so much as this, but it is so hard to know how she tries and yet not to speak of it to any one. I don't mean to blame my father, Mr. Maude, but you know what men are——'

It seemed to occur to her that this was an indiscreet remark, but I said 'Yes, yes,' with entire concurrence; for indeed who should know what men were better than I? After this she seemed as anxious to get rid of me as civility allowed, but I had something to say.

I gabbled it out fast and nervously, in a husky whisper, lest mamma's sharp ear should catch my proposal, and she should nip it in the bud.

'Look here, Miss Babiole; if you like the hills, and you don't mind the cold, and your mother wants a rest and a change, listen. I was just going to advertise for some one to act as caretaker in a little lodge I've got—scarcely more than a cottage, but a little place I don't want to go to rack and ruin. If you and she could exist there in the winter—it is a place where peat may be had for the asking, and it really isn't an uncomfortable little box, and I can't tell you what a service you would be doing me if you would persuade your mother to live in it until—until I find a tenant, you know. In summer I can get a splendid rent for the place, tiny as it is, if only I can find some one to keep it from going to pieces in the meantime. It's

not badly furnished,' I hurried on mendaciously, 'and there's an old woman to do the housework——'

But here Babiole, who had been drinking in my words with parted lips and starlight eyes like a child at its first pantomime, dazzled, bewildered, delighted, drew herself straight up, and became suddenly prim.

'In that case, Mr. Maude,' said she, with demure pride that resented the suspicion of charity, 'if the old woman can take care of the house, surely she doesn't want two other people to take care of her.'

'But I tell you she's dead!' I burst out angrily, annoyed at my blundering. 'There was an old woman to look after the place, but she was seventy-four, and she died the week before last, of old age—nothing infectious. Now, look here; you tell your mother about it, and see if you can't persuade her to oblige me. I'm sure the

change would do her good; for it's very healthy there. Why, you know the Queen lives within eight miles of my house, and you may be sure her Majesty wouldn't be allowed to live anywhere where the air wasn't good. Now, will you promise to try?'

She said 'Yes,' and I knew, from the low earnest whisper in which she breathed out the word, that she meant it with all her soul. I left her and almost ran back to my hotel, as excited as a schoolboy, longing for the next morning to come, so that I could go back to Broad Street, and learn the fate of my new freak. Any one who had witnessed my anxiety would have decided at once that I must be in love with either the mother or the daughter; but I was not. The promise of a new interest in life, of a glimpse of pleasant society up in my hills, and the fancy we all occasionally have for being kind to something, were all as strong as my pity for

the mother, my admiration for the daughter, and my respect for both.

I was debating next morning how soon it would be discreet to call, when a note was brought to me, which had been left 'by a young lady.' I tore it open like a frantic lover. It was from Mrs. Ellmer, an oddly characteristic letter, alternately frosty and gushing, but not without the dignity of the hard-working. She said a great deal ceremoniously about my kindness, a great deal about her friends in London, her position and that of 'my husband, a well-known artist, whom you doubtless are acquainted with by name.' But she wound up by saying that since her health required that she should have change of air, and since I had been so very kind that she could scarcely refuse to do me any service which she could conscientiously perform, she would be happy to act as caretaker of my house, and to keep it in

order during the winter for future tenants, provided I would be kind enough to understand that she and her daughter would do all the work of the house, and further that they might be permitted to reside in a strictly private manner.

'Strictly private!' I laughed heartily to myself at this expression. The dear lady could hardly wish for more privacy than she would get with four or five feet of snow piled up before her door. I was quite light-hearted at my success, and I had to tone down my manner to its usual grave and melancholy pitch before I knocked again at their door.

Mrs. Ellmer opened the door herself, thus disappointing me a little; Babiole's simple confidences, which I liked to think were the result not only of natural frankness, but of instinctive trust in me, were pleasanter to listen to than her mother's more artificial conversation. We were both very dignified, both

ceremoniously grateful to each other, and when we entered the sitting-room and began to discuss preliminaries in a somewhat pompous and long-winded manner, Babiole sat, quiet as a mouse, in a corner, as if afraid to disturb by a breath the harmonious settlement of a plan on which she had set her heart.

At last all was arranged. It was now Monday; Mrs. Ellmer and her daughter were to hold themselves in readiness to enter into possession by the following Friday or Saturday, when I should return to Aberdeen to escort them to Larkhall Lodge. I rose to take my leave, not with the easy feeling of equality of the day before, but with deep humility, and repeated assurances of gratitude, to which Mrs. Ellmer replied with mild and dignified protest.

But, in the passage, Babiole danced lightly along to the door like a kitten, and holding up her finger as a sign to me to keep silence,

she clapped her hands noiselessly and nodded to me several times in deliciously confiding freemasonry.

'I worked hard for it,' she said at last in a very soft whisper, her red lips forming the words carefully, near to my ear. 'Good-bye, Mr. Maude,' she then said aloud and demurely, but with her eyes dancing. And she gave my hand a warm squeeze as she shook it, and let me out into the nipping Scotch air in the gloom of the darkening afternoon, with a new and odd sense of a flash of brightness and warmth into the world.

Then I walked quickly along, devising by what means that cottage, which my guilty soul told me was bare of a single stick, could be furnished and habitable by Friday. And a cold chill crept through my bones as a new and hitherto unthought-of question thrust itself up in my mind:

What would Ferguson say?

CHAPTER VI

I MADE a hasty tour of the second-hand shops in Aberdeen, being wise enough to know that if she were to find the cottage too spick and span, Mrs. Ellmer would in a moment discover my pious fraud. Having got together in this way a very odd assortment of furniture, I was rather at a loss about kitchen utensils, when I was seized with the happy inspiration of buying a new set of them for my own service, and handing over those at present in use in my kitchen to Mrs. Ellmer. Not knowing much about these things, I had to buy in a wholesale fashion, more, I fancy, to the advantage of the seller than to my own. However,

the business was got through somehow, the things were to be sent on the following day, and I sneaked back to Ballater by the 4.35 train, wondering how I should break the news to Ferguson, and wishing that by some impossible good luck the immaculate one might have committed in my absence some slight breach of discipline which would give me for once the superior position. If I could only find him drunk! But though second to none in his fondness for whiskey, nobody but himself could tell when he had had more than enough; so that hope was vain.

It was not that I was afraid of Ferguson; far from it. But his punctuality, his unflagging mechanical industry, his many uncompromising virtues made him a person to be reckoned with; and it would have been easier to own to a caprice inconsistent with one's principles to a more intellectual person than to him.

It was getting dark before the train stopped at Ballater, a few minutes before six. I had to go through the village, over the rickety wooden bridge—for the new one of stone was not built then—and along the road which lies on the south side of the Dee. The hills were on my left, their bases covered with slim birch-trees, whose bare branches swayed and hissed like whips in the winter wind; on the right, below the road, ran the crooked turbulent little stream of Dee, now swollen with late autumn rains, swirling round its many curves, and rushing between the piles of the bridge till the wooden structure rocked again. Would those two delicate women be frightened away by the cold and the loneliness from the nest I was building for them, I wondered, as I turned to the right to cross the little stone bridge that arches over the Muick just before that stream runs into the Dee. I stopped and looked around me. There was

a faint white light over the western hills which enabled me to see dim outlines of the objects I knew. Just beyond the bridge was the forsaken little churchyard of Glenmuick, which not even a ghost would care to haunt, where now a cluster of gaunt bare ash-trees thrust up spectral arms from the ground among the mildewed grave-stones. The lonely manse, a plain stone house shadowed by dark evergreens, stood back a little from the road on the opposite side. A mile away, with the rushing Dee between, the spire of Ballater church stood up among the roofs of the village, flanked by fir-crowned Craigendarroch on the north, and the Pannanich Hills on the south. Straight on my road lay between flat Lowland fields to a ragged fringe of tall firs behind which, on a rising ground, the shell of an old deserted dwelling, known as Knock Castle, served in summer as a meagre shelter for the Highland sheep in

sudden storms. At this point the road turned sharply to the left, the fringe of fir-trees growing thicker upon the skirts of the forest; a few paces farther this road divided into two branches which struck off from each other in the form of a V, the southernmost one leading to Larkhall through a mile of fir-forest. Would the very approach to their new abode through this dark and winding road depress the poor little women into looking upon the cottage as a prison, after the life and movement they were used to?

The private road which led through my own plantation to the house was divided from the public thoroughfare by no lodge, no gate, but ran modestly down between borders of grass, which grew long and rank in the summer time, for about half a mile, until, the larches and Scotch firs growing more sparsely to the south, one caught wider and wider glimpses of broad green meadows

where two or three horses were turned out to find a meagre pasture. Here the drive was carried over a little iron ornamental bridge, which crossed a stream that was but a thread in the warm weather; and leaving the grass and the trees behind, one came upon a broad lawn which ran right up to the walls of the house, flanked to the north by more grass and more trees, which shut out the view of the stables and of the unused cottage. To the south the land made a sudden dip, and the hollow thus formed was laid out as a garden, while the great bank that sheltered it formed a succession of terraces from which one caught glimpses of the rushing Muick between the birches that lined the banks of the impetuous little stream.

The house was a most unpretentious building, in the plainest style of Scotch country-house architecture, with rough

cream-coloured walls, a tiled roof, small irregular windows, and a mean little porch. It was only saved from ugliness by a growth of ivy over the lower portion and by a freak of the designer, whereby one end was raised a story above the rest, and the roof of this portion made to slope north and south, instead of east and west, like that of the rest of the building. At the back the firs and larches rose to a great height, the house seeming to nestle under their protection whenever the winter storms burst over the bleak hills around.

Ferguson was glad to see me, and welcomed me back with a cordiality which made my mind easier on the subject of the announcement I had to make to him. I went up to my room and, finding everything prepared for me, told him I was ready for dinner. Instead of going downstairs, he only said, 'Yes, sir; it is

coming up,' and knelt down to pull off my boots.

'All right,' said I; 'I can do that. I'm very hungry.'

'No doubt of it, sir,' he answered, but did not stir. 'The fact is, sir, that knowing you would come home hungry, and maybe very much fatigued, and that to be in the kitchen serving dinner and up here attending upon you at the same time is a moral impossibility, I made bold to ask an old and very respectable female that was staying in the village to give me a little help—just for this evening, sir. She is very clean in her ways, sir, and a most respectable and God-fearing body.'

I jumped at the news, and congratulated him upon his forethought with great heartiness.

'I have no more objection to seeing a woman's face about the place than you have yourself, Ferguson,' I said cordially; 'in fact

I have just given permission to two poor ladies to pass the winter in the cottage at the back, and I want you to help me to put the place straight a bit for them. They come in on Friday. I don't want the place to fall to pieces with dry rot for want of some one to live in it.'

'Ladies won't keep the dry rot out of a place, sir,' answered Ferguson, with dry contempt. 'However, you know best, sir, what kind of cattle you like to harbour in your own barns, and I daresay they'll be snug enough till the snow comes.'

This dark suggestion was but the echo to my own fears. I was so anxious to secure a co-operation in my plan, not merely perfunctory, but zealous, knowing well, as I did, the highly-sensitive mood in which the elder at least of my new tenants would arrive, that even after this scantily-gracious speech I humbled myself more than was meet.

'By the bye, Ferguson,' I began again after a short pause, during which he helped me on with my coat, 'I'm thinking of having the little north room upstairs fitted up for you, as a sort of—sort of housekeeper's room, butler's room, you know.' Mine was such a nondescript household that it was not easy to find a designation for any of the apartments, but I wished thus neatly to intimate that if my mayor of the palace had matrimonial intentions, his do-nothing king would not stand in his way. 'Now that my household is becoming larger, I daresay you would like to have some place where you and Tim and Mrs.—Miss—what did you say her name was? could sit in the evenings.'

'Neither Mrs. nor Miss anything did I say was her name,' answered Ferguson, with grave deliberation. 'Plain Janet, sir; she leaves titles to her betters. And the kitchen does very well for me, sir, and for

Janet too if you care to engage her as housekeeper, after due trial of her capabilities.'

'Oh, if she satisfies you she will satisfy me.'

'None the less I should wish you to see her, that you may understand it was for your better service and not for my own pleasure that I introduced her here. I have no opinion of women, sir, until they are past the age for frivolity, and I'm not handsome enough to go courting myself.'

Whether this was a warning to me not to be beguiled into a fatal trust in the power of my own beauty, and an obscure hint that in his opinion I was in danger of making a fool of myself, Ferguson's face was too wooden to betray; but the manner in which he gave his services towards putting the cottage in order was unsatisfactory, not to say venomous. He veiled his displeasure with my new freak under an officious zeal for the comfort

of the coming tenants, which was much harder to deal with than stubborn unwillingness to work for them would have been. My assurances that one was an invalid and the other a child only supplied him with fresh forms of indirect attack. He was surprised that I did not have one of the two rooms on the ground-floor fitted up as a bedroom, as invalids cannot walk up and down stairs; he was kind enough to place in one of the upper rooms, which he persisted in calling 'the nursery,' a small wooden horse of the primitive straight-legged kind, a penny rattle, and a soft fluffy parrot; and when I impatiently pitched the things out at the door he seemed dismayed, and said 'he had thought they would please the wee bairn.'

That old beast took all the pleasure out of the little excitement of furnishing. On the morning after my return, he took care to present to me the respectable Janet; he had,

indeed, not overrated her magnificent lack of meretricious charms; for in the wooden face and hard blue eyes I recognised at once the features of my faithful attendant, additional wrinkles taking the place of the sabre-cut. She was his mother. As, however, neither made any reference to this fact, I treated it as a family secret and made no indiscreet inquiries.

The eventful Friday came. I was in the cottage as soon as it was light, making for the last time the tour of the two bedrooms, kitchen, and sitting-room, trying all the windows to see that they were draught-tight, passing my hands along the walls in a futile attempt to find out if they were damp. In the sitting-room I stayed a long time, moving about the furniture, a second-hand suite, covered with dark red reps; I was disgusted with the mournful bareness of the apartment, and wondered how I could

have been so stupid as to forget that women liked ornaments. I went back to my house and ransacked it furtively for nicknacks, without much success. First, I reviewed the pictures: a regular bachelor's collection they were, not objectionable from a man's point of view, but for ladies——. No, the pictures were hopeless, with the exception of huge engravings, 'The Relief of Lucknow,' and 'Queen Philippa Begging the Lives of the Burgesses,' which, though perfectly innocuous to a young girl's mind, were not exhilarating to anybody's. Besides, fancy being caught by Ferguson staggering under the burden of those ponderous works of art! I had not known before how meagre were the appointments of my home; my five years of wandering had given me a traveller's indifference to all but necessaries, so that, as I looked round the study, where I spent nearly all the time that I passed

indoors, I saw little that could be spared. It was a comfortable-looking room enough, with its three big windows, two looking south over the terraced garden and the wooded valley of the Muick, the remaining one east over the lawn and the drive, and more trees. The west wall of the room was filled from floor to ceiling by book-shelves of the plainest kind; these were filled, not with the student's methodically-arranged collection of sombre and well-worn volumes, not with the 'gentleman's' suspiciously neat and bright 'complete sets' in morocco and half-calf, which to remove seems as improper as to scrape off the wall-paper would be; but with the oddest of odd lots of literary ware, in a dozen languages, in all sizes and all varieties of binding and lack of binding, no two volumes of anything together, and not a book that I didn't love among them, from Montaigne, in dear dirty paper covers,

hanging by a thread, to Thackeray in a beastly *édition de luxe*.

On the north wall was the fireplace—wide, high, old-fashioned and warm—with a discoloured white marble mantelpiece, decorated with fat bewigged Georgian cupids. Above it hung an old cavalry sword with which my father had cut his way through the Russians at Inkermann. Close to the fireplace, and with its back to the book-shelves, stood my own especial chair—big, roomy, well worn—covered with dark red morocco, like the rest of the furniture. A reading-table stood in the corner beside it, and on the right hand was a bigger table, piled high with books and papers, cigars, bills and rubbish. There was a writing-table in one corner, at which I never wrote; a sofa covered with more literary lumber; two cabinets crammed with curiosities collected on my travels, tossed in with little attempt at arrangement; a card-table on

which stood a quantity of old-fashioned silver, such as tall candlesticks, goblets, a punch-bowl and a massive last-century urn. A stuffed duck, a Dutch tankard, a pair of elk's horns, and a bust of Dante surmounted by a fox's brush, occupied the top of the book-shelves. A high plain fourfold screen, as dark as the rest of the time-worn furniture, hid the door; and close to the screen a dog-kennel, with the front taken out and replaced by a strong iron grating, formed the winter home of a large brown monkey, which I had bought at a sale with the fascinating reputation of being dangerous, but which had belied its character by allowing me to bring it home on my shoulders. To-to, so called for no better reason than that my collie, whose favourite resting-place was now well defined on the goatskin hearthrug, was named Ta-ta, had from our first introduction treated me with such marked tolerance that

I, in my loneliness, had begun to feel a sort of superstitious fondness for the brute, and fancied I saw more reason and affection in his blinking brown eyes than in any of the Scotch pebbles which served as organs of vision to my Gaelic neighbours. When I first bought him it was mild enough for him to live in the yard; but when the weather grew cold, and he was brought into the kitchen, he got on so ill with the powers there that I had to take compassion upon him and them, and remove To-to to the study, where he justified his promotion by the reserve and gravity of his manners, his only marked foible being a furious jealousy of Ta-ta, whose resting-place was just beyond the utmost tether of the monkey's chain. Rarely did an evening pass without some skirmish between the two. Perhaps Ta-ta, seeing me smile over the book I was reading, and anxious to share my enjoyment, even if she could not understand the

joke, would incautiously get up and wag her tail. Whereupon To-to would dash across the hearthrug and assist her, and much unpleasantness would follow, the dog barking, the monkey chattering, the master swearing —all three members of the menagerie trying to come off conqueror in the *mêlée*. Or else To-to would fall from the top of his kennel to the floor, with a loud noise, and would lie stiff and still on the rug, as if in a fit; and then the simple Ta-ta would walk over to investigate the case, and the monkey would seize her ears and twist them round with jabbering triumph. I kept a small whip to separate the combatants on these occasions, but I only dared use it very sparingly; as, though its effect upon To-to's coarser nature was salutary in the extreme in reducing him to instant love and obedience, as the boot of the costermonger does his wife, the gentler Ta-ta would look up at me with such piteous

protest in her dark eyes that I felt a brute for the next half hour.

From this room, the scene of most of my domestic life, I took a pair of silver candlesticks and a Dresden cup and saucer. Into the unused drawing-room, which I had had fitted up years ago in the Louis Quinze style, I just peeped; but there was nothing very tempting in white and gold curly-legged furniture tied up in brown holland on a cold polished floor, so I locked the door again, and carried away my prizes to the cottage, where they certainly improved the look of the sitting-room mantelpiece.

I had no sort of carriage more convenient than a Norfolk-cart, so on my way to Aberdeen I ordered a fly to be at Ballater Station on my return with my new tenants. Both the ladies were already dressed for their journey, and we started at once, Mrs. Ellmer hastening to inform me that she had sent

most of her luggage to some friends in London, to account, I fancy, poor lady, for having only one shabby trunk and two stage baskets. Babiole sat very quietly during the railway journey, looking out of window at the now dreary and bleak landscape; and I spoke so little that any one might have thought I would rather have been alone. But, indeed, I was only afraid, from the happy excitement which glowed in the faces of both talkative mother and silent daughter, lest their bright expectations should be disappointed by the simplicity and desolation of the place they persisted in regarding as a palace of delights.

'It's a very homely place, you know,' I said solemnly, after being bantered in a sprightly manner by Mrs. Ellmer upon my artfulness in building myself a fortress up in the hills where, like the knights of old, I could indulge in what lawless pranks I pleased. 'And I assure you that nothing

could possibly be more simple than my mode of life there. Whatever of the bold bad bandit there may have been in my composition ten years back has been melted down into mere harmless eccentricity long ago.'

'Ah! you are not going to make me believe that,' said Mrs. Ellmer, with a giddy shake of the head. 'Why, the very name Larkhall betrays you.'

I believe the dear lady really did think the name had been given in commemoration of 'high jinks' I had held there; but I hastened to assure here that 'lark' was simply the Highland pronunciation of 'larch,' a tree which grew abundantly in the neighbourhood. However, she only smiled archly, and seeing that the imaginary iniquities she seemed bent on imputing to me in no way lessened her exuberant happiness in my society, I left my character in her hands, with only a glance at Babiole, who seemed, with her eyes fixed

on the moving landscape, to be deaf to what went on inside the carriage. I was rather glad of it.

When we got to Ballater the little shed of a station was crowded by rough villagers, all eagerly enjoying the splendid excitement of the arrival of the train. A dense, wet Scotch mist enveloped us as we stepped on to the platform, chilled by our cold journey; still, they both smiled with persistent happiness, which grew rapturous when we all got into a roomy fly which Mrs. Ellmer called 'your carriage.' They were charmed with the village, which looked, through the veil of fine rain, a most depressing collection of stiff stone and slate dwellings to my *blasé* eyes. They were delighted with the cold and dreary drive. They pronounced the dark fir-forest through which we drove 'magnificent'; and, finally, after a hushed and reverential silence as we went through the plantation, both were

transfixed with admiration at the sight of my modest dwelling. Mrs. Ellmer even went so far as to admire the 'fine rugged face' of Ferguson, who was standing at the hall door scowling his worst scowl. I did not risk an encounter with him, but led the ladies straight into the cottage, where a peat fire was glowing in each of the lower rooms. We went first into the sitting-room ; a lighted lamp was in the middle of the table, the tea-things were at one end. I glanced from mother to daughter, trying to read their first impression of their new home. Mrs. Ellmer's eyes, sharpened by sordid experience to hungry keenness, took in every detail at once with critical satisfaction, while her lips poured forth commonplaces of vague delight. The climax of her pleasure was the discovery of the cup and saucer on the mantelpiece. By the way in which her thin face lighted up I saw she was a connoisseur. In looking at it she forgot

me and for a moment paused in her enraptured monologue.

Babiole took it all differently. She seemed to hold her breath as she looked slowly round, as if determined to gaze on everything long enough to be sure that it was real; then, with a little sob, she turned her head quickly, and her innocent eyes, soft and bright with unspeakable gratitude, fell on me.

You must have been for years an object of horror and loathing to your fellow-men to know what that look, going straight from soul to soul with no thought of the defects of the bodily envelope, was to me. Perhaps it was because my life had so long been barren of all pleasures dependent on my fellow-creatures that I could neither then, nor later that evening when I was alone, recall any sensation akin to its effect in sweetness or vividness except the glow I had felt after

Babiole's girlish confidence to me at the door of the Aberdeen lodging. I suppose I must have stood smiling at the child with grotesque happiness, for Mrs. Ellmer, turning from contemplation of the cup and saucer, drew her thin lips together very sourly.

'And now I will leave you to your tea,' said I hastily. 'I told Janet to put everything ready for you.'

'Thank you, Mr. Maude, you are too good. We require no waiting on, I assure you,' broke in Mrs. Ellmer, with rather tart civility.

'Oh no, I only told her to put the kettle on in the kitchen,' I protested humbly. And, with ceremonious hopes that they would be comfortable, I retreated, Babiole giving my fingers a warm-hearted squeeze when it came to her turn to shake hands. The child was following me to let me out when her mother

interposed and came with me to the door herself.

She took my hand and held it while she assured me that she was so much overpowered by my distinguished kindness and courtesy that I must excuse her if, in the effort to express her feelings adequately, she found herself without words. I'm sure I wished she would, for she went on in the same strain, making convulsive little clutches at my fingers to emphasise her speech, until both she and I began to shiver. She did not let me go until Babiole appeared behind her, flushed and smiling, in the little passage. Then Mrs. Ellmer's fingers sprang up from mine like an opened latch and, dismissed, I raised my hat and hurried off.

I had not gone half a dozen yards when I met Janet on her way to the cottage; she curtseyed and told me, in answer to my question, that she was taking some tea

to the ladies. After a moment's hesitation I turned and followed her, proposing to ask them whether they would like some books.

Janet opened the door quietly without knocking, and went into the kitchen on the left, while I stood on the rough fibre mat outside the sitting-room, having grown suddenly shy about intruding again. I heard Babiole's clear childish voice.

'Oh, mamma, if only papa doesn't find us out, how happy we shall be here! Mr. Maude is a good man, I am sure of it!'

'As good as the rest of them, I dare-say,' answered her mother in tones of pure vinegar. 'Understand, if you ever meet him when I'm not with you, you are not to speak to him. It makes me ill to look at his hideous wicked face. There's some-one in the kitchen, run and see who it is.'

And the poor Beast, thinking he had heard enough, and afraid lest Beauty should catch him eavesdropping, slunk away from the door-mat and made his way home with his tail between his legs.

CHAPTER VII

THOSE unlucky few words that I had overheard created a great breach between me and my tenants, and, moreover, brought on in the would-be philosopher a fit of misanthropical melancholy. I could not get over the poor little woman's cynical hypocrisy for some days, during which I never went near the cottage; and if I met either mother or daughter in my walks or rides, I contented myself with raising my hat ceremoniously, and giving them as brief a glimpse of my 'wicked hideous face' as possible. Ha! ha! I would show them whether or not I was dependent on their society, and how

much of selfish libertinism there had been in my wish to house them comfortably for the winter; a pair of idiots!

But this noble pride wore itself out in a fortnight, at the end of which time I began to think it was I who was the idiot, to nourish resentment against a pair of helpless creatures who, too poor to refuse an offer which saved them from brutality and starvation, had seen enough of the dark side of human nature to put small faith in disinterested motives, and had no weapon but their own wits wherewith to fight their natural enemy—man. Besides, my solitude had grown ten times more solitary now that, sitting alone in my study at night, with To-to languidly stretching himself on the kennel in front of me, paying no attention to me whatever, and Ta-ta, who really had capacities for sympathy, lying asleep on the rug at my feet, I knew that, not a hundred

yards away, there were slender women's forms flitting about, and girlish prattle going on, by a little modest fireside that was a home.

So I suddenly remembered that I ought to call and ask them if they found their new home to their liking. Anxious, for the first time for five years, to make the best of a bad business, so far as my person was concerned, I exchanged the coarse tweed Norfolk suit I usually wore for a black coat and gray trousers I used to wear in town, which, though doubtless a little old-fashioned in cut, might reasonably be supposed to pass muster in the wilds, and even to give me a rather dashing appearance. But, alas! It did not. It showed me, on the contrary, how far I had slipped away from civilisation. My hair was too long, what complexion I had left too weather-beaten, while the seamed and scarred right side of my face looked more hideous

than ever. I changed back quickly to my usual coat, scarcely acknowledging to myself that some sort of vague wish to live once more the life of other men was disappointed.

I found Mrs. Ellmer and her daughter in their outdoor dress; they had been driven in by a snow shower, one of the first of the season. The sitting-room looked now cosy and habitable, if a little untidy, the habits of the touring actress being still manifest in a collection of unframed cabinet photographs—not all uncalculated to bring a blush to the Presbyterian cheek—which stood in a row on the mantelpiece. It occurred to me that old Janet might have let out the fact that I turned back with her to the cottage and, perhaps, overheard something to my disadvantage, for Babiole looked frightened and shy, and Mrs. Ellmer's manner was almost apologetically humble. There was constraint enough upon us all for me to make my visit

very short, but as I left I formally invited them to dine with me on the following evening.

With what shamefaced *nonchalance* I told Ferguson that day to have the drawing-room opened and cleaned on the following morning! With what stolid lowering resignation he extracted my reason for this unparalleled order! However, he made no protest. But next morning, while I was at breakfast, he entered the room in his usual clockwork manner, but with a glow of pleasurable feeling in his cold eyes.

'If you please, sir, Janet would be obliged if you would step into the drawing-room and see if you would still wish to have it prepared for the party this evening.'

Party! I could have broken his neck. But I only followed him in an easy manner into the hall. It was full of blinding smoke, which was pouring forth from the open door

of the drawing-room. I dashed heroically into the apartment, only to be met with a denser cloud, which rushed into my mouth and made my eyes smart and burn. Some winged thing, either a bird or a bat, flapped against the walls and ceiling in the gloom. Janet was choking at the fireplace, in great danger of being smothered.

'What is all this?' I choked angrily, getting back into the hall.

'Nothing, sir,' answered Ferguson, with grim delight. 'Nothing but that Janet lit the fire to air the room in obedience to your orders, and that the chimney smokes a little. Would you still wish to have the room got ready, sir?'

But he had gone too far; he had roused the lion.

'Come in here,' I said, in a tone which subdued his happiness; and he followed me back into the room. 'Now t-t-take the tongs,'

I continued, as haughtily as coughing would permit, 'and r-ram it up the chimney.'

Cowed, but exceedingly reluctant, he obeyed, and I would not let him relax his efforts until, smothered with soot and dust, dry twigs and blackened snow, he pulled down upon himself a sack, a couple of birds'-nests, and other obstacles which, some from above and some from below, had been deposited in the unused chimney.

'Now,' said I, purple in the face but content, 'you can relight the fire.'

And, satisfied with this moral victory and the prestige it gave me in the eyes of the whole household—for Tim and the out-door genius who gardened twelve acres and looked after four horses had both enjoyed this domestic scandal from the doorway—I marched back to my cold coffee and congealed bacon.

There were no more difficulties, though,

at least none worth mentioning. It is true that on returning from my morning's ride I found the hall so stuffed up with furniture that I had to enter my residence through one of the study windows, five feet from the ground; and that I had to picnic on a sandwich in the study instead of lunching decorously in the dining-room; but these discomforts might be necessary to a thorough cleaning, and could be borne with fortitude. At six o'clock my guests arrived, and, having left their cloaks in a spare-room opened for the occasion, they were led to shiver in the drawing-room, which still smelt of smoke and soap and water. Mrs. Ellmer, with chattering teeth, admired the painted ceiling, the white satin chairs bright with embossed roses, the pale screen, and all the fanciful glories of the room, the magnificence of which evidently impressed and delighted her. Babiole seemed unable to take her eyes off two oil-paintings,

both portraits of the same lady, which, in massive gilt oval frames, occupied a prominent position at the end of the room opposite the fireplace.

'Babiole is fascinated, you see, Mr. Maude,' said her mother, with the little affected laugh which gave less the idea of pleasure than that of a wish to please. 'If she dared she would ask who those ladies are.'

'They are both the same, mother,' said Babiole, so softly, so shyly, that one could think she guessed there was some story about the portraits.

Mrs. Ellmer's eyes began to beam with a less artless curiosity.

'Would it be indiscreet to ask her name?'

'Her name was Helen.'

'Ah, poor lady! She is dead, then?'

'No, I believe she is alive.'

Babiole glanced quickly from the pictures

to my face and pressed her mother's hand, as that lady was about to burst forth into more questions. I don't know that my countenance expressed much, for my feelings on the subject of the original of the portrait had long ceased to be keen; but I think the little one, being very young, liked to make as much as possible out of any suggestion of a romance. I took the girl by the arm and led her to the end of the room, where the portraits hung.

'Now,' said I, 'which of these two pictures do you like best?'

Babiole instantly assumed the enormous seriousness of a child who is honoured with a genuine appeal to its taste. After a few moments' grave comparison of the pictures, she turned to me, with the face of a fairy judge, and asked solemnly—

'Do you mean which should I love best, or which do I admire most as a work of art?'

This altogether unexpected question, which came so quaintly from the childish lips, made me laugh. Babiole turned from me to the pictures, rather disconcerted, and Mrs. Ellmer broke in with her sharp high voice—

'Babiole understands pictures; she has had a thorough art education from her father, Mr. Maude.'

'Oh yes,' said I, wondering vaguely why mothers always show up so badly beside their daughters. Then I turned again to the girl. 'I didn't know how clever you were, Miss Babiole. Supposing I had two friends, one who had known this lady and loved her, and the other who was a great art collector. Which portrait would each like best?'

Babiole decided without hesitation. 'The art collector would like this one, and the one who had loved her would like that,' she said, indicating each with the glance of her eyes.

'But the art collector's is the prettier face of the two,' I objected.

'Yes; but it isn't so good.'

I was astonished and fascinated by the quickness of the girl's perception.

'You ought to grow into an artist,' I said, smiling. 'The pretty one was in the Academy this year, painted by a famous artist. I heard it was a wonderful portrait, and I commissioned a man to buy it for me. The other is an enlargement, by an unknown artist, from half a dozen old photographs and sketches, of the same lady five years ago.'

'And is it exactly like her—like what she was, I mean?'

'No; she was prettier, but not so—good.'

I used the word 'good' because she had used it, though it was not the word I should have chosen. I wanted her to say something more, for she was still looking at the pictures in a very thoughtful way; but at that

moment Mrs. Ellmer, skipping lightly along the polished floor in a way that made me tremble for her balance, thrust her head between us, and laid her pointed chin on her daughter's shoulder.

'And what are you two so deeply interested about?' she asked playfully.

Babiole put her tender little cheek lovingly against her mother's thin face, and I began talking about art in a vague and ignorant manner, which incautiously showed that I disliked the interruption. Ferguson came to my rescue with the solemn announcement of dinner.

From Mrs. Ellmer's rather critical attitude towards the different dishes, I gathered that she prided herself on her own cookery, and Babiole ingenuously let out that mamma had once superintended a very grand dinner of some friends of theirs—'Oh, such rich people!'—and it had been a great success.

Mamma seemed a little uneasy at this indiscretion, but hastened to add that they were such dear friends of hers that when they were left in a difficulty by the sudden illness of their man-cook—a man who had been in the first families, and had come to them from Lord Stonehaven's—she had overwhelmed them by the offer of her services.

'I think all ladies should learn cooking, Mr. Maude; and, indeed, many do now. The lessons are very expensive, certainly; but one never regrets either the time or the money when it is once learned,' said she. 'Servants never understand how things ought to be done unless there is some one able to give them a little guidance.'

To all this conversation Ferguson listened with the amiability of an enraged bear restrained by iron bars from making a meal of his tormentors.

Babiole had little attention to spare for

any one but Ta-ta, with whom she had struck up a rapidly ripening friendship.

'Ta-ta has taken a fancy to you,' I said, smiling. 'She always likes the people I like,' I added, with the common fatuity of owners of pet animals.

Upon this Mrs. Ellmer piped out 'Ta-ta, Ta-ta, Ta-ta!' until, to stop her, I beckoned the dog to her side of the table. But the collie, seeing that she had nothing better than a raisin to offer, merely sniffed at it, avoided the threatened caress, and slunk back to her old place by Babiole, in whose lap she rested her head contentedly.

While her mother was still laughing shrilly at this misadventure, the child asked if they might see my monkey.

'Shall I take you to my study now,' said I, 'and show you how an old bachelor passes his evenings?'

'Is the monkey fond of you too, Mr.

Maude?' asked Babiole, as I opened the door for them.

'I flatter myself that he is. At least I can boast that he flies at any one whom he suspects of doing me harm. Two months ago a doctor was attending me for a swelling on my neck. He came day after day, and To-to treated him with all the courtesy due to an honoured guest, until he decided one day that the swelling ought to be lanced, and took from his pocket a case of instruments. He had scarcely opened it when To-to, chattering and grimacing, sprang across the hearthrug with such violence that he broke his chain, and fastened his teeth in the doctor's hand.'

'What a savage brute!' exclaimed Mrs. Ellmer.

Babiole thought it out as we crossed the hall, and then spoke gravely—

'But the monkey was wrong, for the

doctor never meant to hurt you,' she said, in her deliberate way.

'I suppose you gave him a good beating,' said Mrs. Ellmer.

'No, I didn't. I scolded him till we were alone together, for the sake of the doctor's feelings. But when he was gone I sneaked up to To-to's kennel and stroked him and gave him a beautiful bone. The scolding was for the mistake, you know, and the bone for the devotion.'

We entered the study, Mrs. Ellmer first, I last. The alarmed lady, on coming round the screen, was close to the monkey before she saw him. To-to only blinked up at her composedly, with no demonstration of hostility; but to my horror and amazement, no sooner did he catch sight of Babiole, who came up to him bravely by my side, with her little hand cordially outstretched towards him, than he made a savage spring at her, his

teeth and eyes gleaming with malice. I was just in time to draw her back in my arms, so that he fell to the ground instead of fastening on her poor little wrist. Mrs. Ellmer screamed, Ta-ta began to bark and make judiciously-distanced rushes at the monkey; while Babiole recovered herself, very pale, but quite quiet, and I, strangely excited, gave To-to a sharp blow.

'Oh, don't!' cried the child; but then, smiling archly, though the colour driven away by the little fright had not yet come back to her cheek, she added, 'but you will give him a bone as a reward when we are gone.'

'Do you think so?' said I, in a rather constrained voice. Then, seeing that Mrs. Ellmer's eyes were fixed curiously upon me, I added, 'The first mistake, you see, was excusable; there was a reason for it. But this attack was unprovoked.'

'Yes,' said Babiole naïvely; 'for how could I do you any harm?'

'Yes, how indeed?' said I.

But even as I said this, and looked at her blue-eyed face, I thought that perhaps the monkey might prove to be wiser than either of us, unless I grew wiser as she grew older.

The rest of the evening passed pleasantly enough in the ransacking of my cabinets of curiosities; Mrs. Ellmer, who proved to be a connoisseur of more things than china, took delight in the value of the treasures themselves, while Babiole pleased herself with such as she thought beautiful, and enjoyed particularly the stories I told about the places I had found them in, and the ways in which I had picked them up. She grew radiant over the present of a Venetian bead necklace, such as can be bought in the Burlington Arcade for a few shillings; but when I told her it was a souvenir from a woman

whose child I had saved from drowning, her joy in her new treasure was suddenly turned to reverence. How did I do it? It was a very simple story; a little boy of four or five had slipped into one of the canals, and I, passing in a gondola, had caught his clothes, or rather his rags, and handed the choking squalling manikin back into the custody of a black-eyed, brown-skinned woman, who had insisted, with impulsive but coquettish gratitude, on presenting me with the beads she wore round her own neck.

'Wasn't she in rags, too, then?' asked Babiole.

'Oh no, she was rather picturesquely got up.'

'Then, I should think, she was not his mother at all.'

'Perhaps not. But all mothers are not like yours.'

'I *know* that,' cooed the girl, tucking her

hand lovingly under the maternal arm. Then, after a pause, she said, 'What a lot of nice places and people you must have seen in all the years you have travelled about, Mr. Maude.'

'How old do you think I am, then?' I asked, struck by something in her tone.

She hesitated, looking shyly from me to her mother.

'No, no,' said I. 'Tell me what you think yourself.'

She glanced at me again, then suggested in a small voice, 'sixty?'

Both Mrs. Ellmer and I began to laugh; and the child, blushing, rubbed her cheek against her mother's sleeve.

'How much would you take off from that, Mrs. Ellmer?'

'Why, I'm sure you can't be a day more than forty-five.'

She evidently thought I should be pleased

by this, the good lady flattering herself that she had taken off at least five years. My first impulse was to set them right rather indignantly, but the next moment I remembered that I should gain nothing but a character for mendacity by telling them that I should not be thirty till next year. So I only laughed again, and then Babiole's voice broke in apologetically.

'I only guessed what I did, Mr. Maude, because you are so very kind; you seem always trying to do good to some one.'

'Here's a subtle and cynical little observer for you,' said I, glancing over the child's head at the mother. 'She knows, you see, that benevolence is the last of the emotions, and is only tried as a last resource when we have used up all the others.'

Babiole looked much astonished at this interpretation, which she understood very imperfectly, and Mrs. Ellmer shook her head

in arch rebuke as she rose to go. They went upstairs together to put on their cloaks, but Babiole came flying down before her mother to have a last peep at the portraits which had fascinated her. I followed her into the drawing-room, where lamp and fire were still burning, and she started and turned as she saw my reflection in the long glass which hung between the pictures.

'Well, are you as happy at the cottage as you thought you would be?' I asked.

'Oh, happier, a thousand times. It is too good to last,' with a frightened sigh.

'Don't you miss the constant change of your travelling life, and the excitement of acting?'

She seemed scarcely to understand me at first, as she repeated, in a bewildered manner, 'excitement!' Then she said simply, 'It's very exciting when you miss the train and the company go on without you; but it's

dreadful, too, because the manager might telegraph to say you needn't come on at all.'

'But the acting; isn't that exciting?'

'It's nice, sometimes, when one has a part one likes; but, of course, I only got small parts, and it's dreadful to have to go on with nothing to say, or for an executioner, or an old woman, with just a line.'

'And don't you like travelling?'

'I like it sometimes in the summer; but in the winter it's so cold, and the places all seem alike; and then the pantomime season comes, and you have nothing to do.'

'What do you do then? What did you do last winter, for instance?'

'We went back to London.'

'Well?'

But Babiole had grown suddenly shy.

'Won't you tell me? Would you rather not?'

'I would rather not.'

At that moment Mrs. Ellmer's voice was heard calling, in sharp tones, for 'Babiole!'

'Here we are, Mrs. Ellmer, taking a last look at the pictures,' I called back, and I led the child out into the hall, where her mother gave a sharp glance from her to me, and wished me good-night rather curtly. I stood at the door to watch them on their way to the cottage, as they would not accept my escort; and through the keen air I distinctly heard this question and answer—

'You want to get us turned out, to spend another winter like the last, I suppose. What did you tell him about your father?'

'Nothing, mother, nothing, indeed!——'

The rest of the child's passionate answer I could not catch, as they went farther away. But I wondered what the secret was that I had been so near learning.

CHAPTER VIII

I ENJOYED that evening so much that I was quite ready to go through another preparatory penance of smoking chimneys and general topsyturveydom to have another like it. But Fate and Ferguson ruled otherwise. I mentioned to him one day that I proposed inviting the ladies again for the following evening, and he said nothing; but when I made a state call on Mrs. Ellmer that afternoon, she brought forward all sorts of unexpected excuses to avoid the visit. Circumstances had made me too diffident to press the point, and I had to conclude, with much mortification, that the sight of my ugly

face for a whole evening had been too distressing to their artistic eyes for them to undergo such a trial again. They, however, invited me to dine with them on Christmas Day, but I was too much hurt to accept the invitation. It was not until long afterwards I found out that, on learning my intention of giving another 'party,' my faithful Ferguson had posted off to the cottage and informed Mrs. Ellmer that his poor mother was so ill she could scarcely keep on her legs, and now master had ordered another 'turn out,' and he expected it would 'do for her' altogether. I only knew, then, that when I told him there was to be no 'party,' his wooden face relaxed into a faint but happy smile, and that my feet ached to kick him.

That winter was what we called mild up there, and it passed most uneventfully for my tenants and for me. We saw very little of each other since that chill to our friend-

ship; but I soon began to find that the little pale woman, who was too acid to excite as much liking as she did pity and respect, had no idea of allowing the obligations between us to lie all on one side. Under the masculine *régime* which had flourished in my household before the irruption of Mrs. Ellmer, her daughter and Janet, the art of mending had been unknown and ignored, and the science of cleaning my study had been neglected. With regard to my own raiment, the Brass Age, or age of pins, succeeded the Bone Age, or age of buttons, with unfailing regularity; and when, with Janet, the Steel Age, or age of needles came in, I sometimes thought I should prefer to go back to primitive barbarism and holes in my stockings rather than hobble about with large lumps of worsted thread at the corners of my toes,—which was the best result of a process which the old lady called 'darning.'

The road to Ballater was for weeks impassable with snowdrifts; no possibility of replenishing one's wardrobe even from the village's meagre resources. At last, being by this time lamer than any pilgrim, I boldly cut out the lumps in my stockings, and thereby enlarged the holes. This flying in the face of Providence must have been an awful shock to Janet, for she related it to Mrs. Ellmer with some acrimony; the result of this was that the active little woman overhauled my wardrobe, and everything else in my house that was in need of repair by the needle; she tried her hand successfully at some amateur tailoring; she hunted out some old curtains, and by a series of wonderful processes, which she assured me were very simple, transformed them from crumpled rags into very handsome tapestry hangings for a draughty corner of my study; she carried off my old silver, piece by piece, and

polished it up until, instead of wearing the mouldy rusty hue of long neglect, it brightened the whole room with its glistening whiteness. I believe this last work was a sacred pleasure to her; Babiole said her mother cooed over the tankards and embraced the punch-bowl. The way that woman made old things look like new savoured of sorcery to the obtuse male mind. Ferguson would take each transfigured article, neatly patched tablecloth, worn skin rug, combed and cleaned to look like new, or whatever it might be, and hold it at arm's length, squinting horribly the while, and then, with a sigh of dismay at the disappearance of the old familiar rents, cast it from him in disgust. The climax of his rage was reached when, one evening at dinner, surprised by an unusually savoury dish, I sent a message of congratulation to Janet. Like a Northern Mephistopheles, his eyes flashed fire.

'I didna know, sir, ye were so partial to kickshaws,' he said haughtily, with the strong Scotch accent into which, on his return to his native hills, he had allowed himself to relapse.

I saw that I had made some fearful blunder, and said no more; but I afterwards learned from Babiole, as a great secret, that her mother had prevailed upon Janet to yield up her daily duties as cook as far as my dinner was concerned; and my heart began to melt and soften as the winter wore on, towards the strictly anonymous little chef who had delivered me from the binding tyranny of haggis and cock-a-leekie.

When the snow melted away from all but the tops of the hills, and there came fresh little sprouts of pale green among the dark feather foliage of the larches, a change came over the tiny household of my tenants. From early morning until the sun began to sink low behind the hills Babiole was

never to be found at the cottage. Sometimes, indeed, she would dash in at midday to dinner, as fresh and sweet as an opening rose; but more often she would stay away until evening began to creep on, taking with her a most frugal meal of a couple of sandwiches and a piece of shortbread. Even that was shared with Ta-ta, whom I encouraged to attend the venturesome little maiden on her long rambles; the dog would follow her now as willingly as he did me, and could be fierce enough upon occasion to prove a far from despicable bodyguard; while I generally contrived to be about the grounds somewhere when she started, and, having noted the direction she took, I went that way for my morning ride. Often I passed them on the road, the girl walking at a sort of dance, the dog leaping and springing about her. At sight of me, Ta-ta would rush to her master, barking with joy; then,

seeing that I would not take the only sensible course of allowing her to follow both her favourites together, she would run from the one to the other, in delirious perplexed excitement, until by a few words and gestures I let her know that her duty was with the beauty and not the beast.

Sometimes I would see the two climbing up a hill together, the collie not more sure-footed than the child. Sometimes as I passed there would be a great waving of handkerchief and wagging of tail from some high cairn, to show me triumphantly how much more they dared than I, trotting on composedly some hundreds of feet below. I was always rather uneasy for the child, wandering to these lonely heights and along such unfrequented roads without any companion but the dog; but her mother, with the odd inconsistency which breaks out in the best of us, could fear no danger to the girl from

coarse peasant or steep cliff, while against the wiles of the well-dressed she put her strictly on her guard. As for the child herself, I could only tell her to be careful of her footing on rugged Craigendarroch, the nearest, the prettiest, the most dangerous of our higher hills: to tell her not to wander whithersoever her fancy led her would have been like warning a star not to mount so high in the sky.

Then as evening fell and I began, like any old woman, to grow anxious, I would hear Ta-ta's tired step in the hall outside my study, and a scratching at my door which gave place to a piteous sniffing and whining if I did not immediately rise to let her in. Then with a gentle wag of the tail she would trot up to the hearthrug and lie down, giving a sideways glance at To-to, who would hop down from his perch and make a grab at her tail to punish her for gadding about, and,

finding that appendage out of reach, would sneak quietly back again and resume his hunt for the flea who would never be caught, to try to persuade us that his fruitless attempt had been a mere inadvertency. How hard Ta-ta would try, when a nice plate of gristle and potato at dinner time had revived her flagging energies, to describe to me the events of the morning's walk! And how the sound of a bright childish laugh from the kitchen would stimulate her remembrance of that jolly run up-hill! I knew, though I said nothing, that Babiole used to come across to find her mother, busy with my dinner; and I could guess, from the altercations I often heard, that the hungry girl stole her share, and laughed at any one who said her nay. The dining-room always grew too hot when that bright laughter penetrated to my ears, and I would say carelessly to Ferguson—

'You can leave the door open.'

He knew, you may be sure, why I liked to sit in a draught while March winds were about; but the stern Scot, however much he might still cherish enmity against the diabolical cleverness of the mother, had had a corner of his flinty heart pulverised by the blooming child.

And so the cold spring passed into cool summer, and I began to notice, little as I saw of her, a change in the pretty maiden. As the season advanced, her vivacity seemed to subside a little, her dancing walk to give place to a more sedate step, while her rambles were often now limited to a climb up Craigendarroch, which formerly would have been a mere incident in the day's proceedings. I remarked upon this to Mrs. Ellmer; for she and I had now, in our loneliness, become great chums.

'Oh, don't you know?' said she, with

her grating little laugh, 'Babiole's in love!'

'In love!' said I slowly. 'A child like that!'

'Oh, it's not a first attachment by any means,' said she, making merry over my surprise, as she swung her little watering-pot with one hand, and put her head on one side to admire a row of handsome gladioluses which she had reared with some care. 'Her first, what you may call serious passion, was at seven years old, two whole years later than my earliest love. By the bye, Mr. Maude, I really must beg you to let me make some cuttings from your rose-trees; I have two excellent briars here, and I flatter myself I can graft as well as any gardener.'

'You can do everything, Mrs. Ellmer,' said I gravely, with honest gratitude and admiration. 'You can make cuttings from every tree in the garden, if you please, and

they will all hold their heads the higher for it.'

The poor lady liked a little bit of simple flattery, and indeed it by no means now seemed out of place. The Highland air had brought the pink colour back to her wan face, and brightened her eyes, so that one now noticed with admiration the extreme delicacy of her features; while the rest and the relief from worry had softened both her careworn expression and the haggard outline of her face. She now, with coquettish sprightliness, tapped my shoulder and shook her head to show me that she had no faith in my blandishments.

'Don't talk to me,' she said, but with a smile which contradicted the prohibition; 'I'm too old for compliments, a woman with a grown-up daughter!'

Now I was quite glad to go back to the subject suggested by her last words.

'Who is the happy object of the young

lady's preference?' I asked, trying to speak in a tone of badinage, though indeed I thought Babiole much too young and too pretty to bestow even the most make-believe affection on any one north o' Tweed, or south of it either, for that matter.

'It's one of the young Duncans, at Fir Lodge; the pretty-looking lad with the curly fair hair.'

I gave a little 'hoch!' of disgust. A great freckle-faced lout of a boy—I knew him! I remembered, too, that the Duncans had joined heartily in a scandalised murmur, far-off sounds of which had reached my ears, at the enormity of my bringing play-acting folk to my Highland seraglio. With very few more words I left Mrs. Ellmer, more put out than I cared to show. However, after looking angrily at the rhododendrons in the drive for a little while, I happily remembered that the annual visit of my four oddly-assorted friends

was due within a month, and that then I should have something more interesting to occupy my mind than the flirtations of a couple of children. 'And after that,' I said to myself, 'I think I shall set off on my wanderings again for a little while, and the Ellmers can remain here until they, too, are tired of it, and so we shall avoid any wrench over the break-up.' That the break-up must come I knew, and, on the whole, I felt that it had better come early than late—for me, at any rate.

I climbed up Craigendarroch next day, and every day for a week after; I never met any one, and every time I was alarmed by the steepness of those rocks to the south, where a poor young fellow who was out fern-hunting fell down the perpendicular cliff one summer's day, and was found a shapeless, lifeless heap four days after on the side of the hill. He was a stranger, and might have lain there till his bones whitened on the rocks and

ferns among the young oak-trees, if a couple of Ballater lads had not stumbled upon his body in their Sunday walk, and called out all the village to see the sight. And these made the most of the excitement in a singular way, holding a highly decorous and Presbyterian wake, settling themselves in a business-like manner like a flock of crows on the broken ground around the stone on which the dead man, scarcely more silent and unconcerned than they, held his mournful levee. This incident had already given a tragic interest to the south side of the pretty hill; and although Babiole knew the place well, and was as sure-footed and nimble as one of its native squirrels, I felt anxious every day when there was no answer to my call of 'Ta-ta! Ta-ta!' and was not satisfied until I had made the circuit of the hill, pushed my way through the barriers of uprooted firs with which the gales of early spring had encum-

bered the hillside on the north, and going on in that direction, came to the bare and almost precipitous slope which forms the southern wall of the Pass of Ballater.

On my eighth visit I heard a faint bark from the ridge of hill to the north-west of the pass; considering this as a clue, I made my way down Craigendarroch, across the meadows round Mona House, a white building of simplest architecture, flanked by a garden where straight rows of bright flowers looked quaintly picturesque against a dark background of fir and hill. Crossing the road which ran at the foot of the ridge, I began to climb. A rough steep path had here been worn among the bracken, and was widened at every ascent by falls of loose soil and stones. I knew what a pretty little nook there was at the top, just the place where a lovelorn maid would delight to make a nest. The path grew steeper than ever towards the

top, and led suddenly to a grassy hollow, one wall of which was a perpendicular gray cliff, broken by narrow and inaccessible ridges on which slender little birch-trees contrived to grow. On the opposite side the mossy ground sloped gently, and the wild rabbits scurried about among the stumps of fallen pines.

I had only gone a few steps along the soft ground when I caught the sound of a light girlish voice; it came from the miniature chasm at the foot of the cliff. I wondered who the child was talking to. But as I came nearer, hearing no voice but hers, I supposed she must be reading aloud.

'Oh no, Roderick,' at last I was close enough to hear, 'I love you passionately, with the love one knows but once. But it is impossible for me to do as you wish. You speak to me of your father; you urge upon me that he would forgive my lowly birth, that

he would welcome to his ancestral halls the woman of your choice, whoever she might be. But do not forget that I too have pride, that I too have a duty to perform to my parents.' Then came a change of tone, and a sort of practical parenthesis, hurried through quickly like a stage direction: 'I don't mean my father of course, because he was so clever that he had to think of his art and wasn't like a father at all.' Then her tone became sentimental again: 'But my mother—mamma is worthy to have all the wealth of kings showered at her feet. She is beautiful, and clever, and good; Mr. Maude—indeed everybody, admires and loves her. No, Roderick, I will not allow my mother to become a mere mother-in-law.'

The bathos of the conclusion upset my gravity; I came close to the edge of the pit and looked down. The little maid was not reading, but was sitting by herself on a tree-

trunk among the stones, with the dog asleep on the edge of her frock, living in a world of her own, and holding converse with the people there. I crept away as quietly as I could and went back home in an amused but rather rapturous state: the next time I saw my goddess, though, she was devouring slice after slice of bread and jam with prosaic ravenousness at the kitchen door.

And I concluded that at fourteen, even with a face like a flower and a voice like a bird's, 'the love one knows but once' and perfect peace of mind are not incompatible things.

CHAPTER IX

It was Fabian Scott who, being by his profession less of a free agent than any other member of my little circle of friends, fixed the date of their yearly visit. As soon as he made known to me the first day when he would be free, I summoned the rest, and not one of them had ever yet failed me. Fabian wrote to me this year, giving the fifteenth of August as the day on which the closing of the theatre at which he was playing would leave him free.

The news of the expected arrivals quickly reached the ears of Mrs. Ellmer, who came skipping along the garden towards me one

morning about a week before the visit, and attacked me at once with much vivacity.

'Aha!' she began, 'and so we were to be left in ignorance of the gay doings, were we?'

'If you allude to the meeting of half a dozen old fogeys on the fifteenth, Mrs. Ellmer, I assure you I was coming to the cottage to tell you about it. But we shall be about as sportive as a gathering of the British Archæological Association, and as we shall be out on the moors all day, I am afraid you won't find the place much livelier than usual. I think,' I added, coming to the pith of the matter with some feeling of awkwardness, 'that you had better keep Miss Babiole more — more with you, while — while the gentlemen are here. Or—or if you would like a trip to the seaside we might see about a couple of weeks at Muchalls or Stonehaven, and that would give us an opportunity of—

of having the cottage whitewashed, you know,' I finished up, with a sudden gleam of tardy inventive genius.

The fact was, I had begun to tingle at the thought of the merciless 'chaff'—as much worse to bear than slander as the stigma of fool is than that of rogue — which the importation of my fair tenants would bring down upon me. Besides, though my four visitors were all old friends, and very good fellows, yet a pretty face may work such Circe-like wonders, even in the best of us, that I thought it better that our bachelor loneliness should be, as before, untempered by the smiles of any woman lovelier than Janet. But Mrs. Ellmer, at my hesitating suggestion, grew rigid and haughty.

'Of course, Mr. Maude,' she said, 'if you wish now to make use of the cottage my daughter and I have done our best to keep in order for you, we shall be ready to pack

up at any time. We can go to-morrow, if you like. I have no doubt that I shall be able to find an opening for the autumn season with some company.'

'No, no, no!' interrupted I emphatically and with some impatience, 'Pray do not think of such a thing. There is plenty of room in my own place for all my friends. My sole object in making the suggestion I did was to prevent your being pestered with the attentions of a lot of rough sportsmen, who, when they were tired of shooting, would find nothing better to do than to worry you and Miss Babiole to death. And you remember,' I ended, as a happy thought, 'how, when you came here, you insisted on privacy.'

'One may have too much even of such a good thing as one's own society,' said she, with an affected little laugh. 'I think I could bear a little attention now, with much equanimity, even from a sportsman who "could

find nothing better to do." Of course, I could expect no more than that from gentlemen of such rank as your guests,' she added, rather venomously. 'But for a change even that might be acceptable.'

Good heavens! The woman would not understand me.

'But Babiole!' I suggested quietly.

'Babiole is only a child; but even if she were not, a daughter of mine would be perfectly able to take care of herself, Mr. Maude.'

After this snub, I could only bow and take myself off, spending the interval before my guests' arrival in schooling myself for the approaching ordeal.

The first to arrive on the fifteenth were Lord Edgar Normanton and Mr. Richard Fussell, the latter, anxious to make the most of his annual taste of rank and fashion, having lain in wait for the former at King's

Cross, and insisted on bearing him company during the entire journey. I met them at Ballater station at 2.15 in the afternoon, and was sorry to hear from Edgar, who never looked otherwise than the picture of robust health, and who was, moreover, getting fat, that he was far from well.

'I tell his lordship that he should take rowing exercise. Nothing like a good pull every day on the river to keep a man in condition,' urged Mr. Fussell, who was fifty inches round what had once been his waist, and who seemed to radiate health and happiness.

They informed me that Fabian Scott had also travelled up by the night mail, but in another compartment; so I went to meet the train, which came into Ballater at 5.50, and found both Fabian and Mr. Maurice Browne disputing so violently that they had forgotten to get out. Fabian had indeed

taken advantage of the stopping of the train to stride up and down the confined area of the railway carriage, gesticulating violently with his hatbox, rug, gun, and various other unconsidered trifles. I guessed that they could only have travelled together from Aberdeen, for there had been no bloodshed. They had been having a little discussion on realism in art, of which Maurice Browne was an ardent disciple. They were still hard at it, in terms unfit for publication, when I mounted the step and put my head in at the window. Excitable Fabian, with his keen eyes still flashing indignation with 'exotic filth,' shook my hand till he brought on partial paralysis of that member, while he fired a last shot into his less erratic opponent.

'No, sir,' he protested vehemently, 'I deny neither your ability nor your good faith, nor those of your French master; but I have the same objection to the fictions of your

school, as works of art, as I should have to the performance of a play written by cripples for cripples. It would be a curiosity, sir, and might attract crowds of morbid-minded people, besides cripples; but it would be none the less a disgusting and degraded exhibition, antagonistic to nature and truth, to which the feeblest "virtue victorious and vice vanquished" melodrama would be as day unto night. With minds attuned to low thoughts, you seek for low things, and degrade them still further by your treatment. You have a philosophy, I admit, sir, but it is the philosophy of the hog.'

And, having poured out this persuasive little harangue with such volubility that not even an Irishman could get in a word edgeways, Fabian allowed himself to be enticed on to the platform, and began asking me questions about myself with childlike affection. Maurice Browne followed, somewhat

refreshed by this torrent of abuse, since the aim of his literary ambition was rather to scandalise than to convince. He was tall, thin, and unhealthy-looking, with a pallid face and pink-rimmed eyes, and an appearance altogether unfortunate in the propagator of a new cult. I believe he was, on the whole, fonder of me than Fabian was. My disastrous ugliness appealed to his distaste for the beautiful, and having once, as a complete stranger, very generously come to my aid in a difficulty, he felt ever after the natural and kindly human liking for a fellow-creature who has given one an opportunity of posing as the deputy of God. These two gentlemen, with their strong and aggressive opinions, formed the disturbing element in our yearly meeting, and, each being always at deadly feud with somebody else, might be reckoned on to keep the fun alive. Both talked to me, and me alone, on our way to

the house, with such sly hits at one another as their wit or their malice could suggest. Fabian raved about the effects of descending sun on heather and pine-covered hills, Maurice Browne bemoaned the stony poverty of the cottages, and opined that constant intermarriages between the inhabitants had reduced the scanty population to idiots. Then Fabian told me how many inquiries had been made about me by old acquaintances, who still hoped I would some day return from the wilds, and Maurice instantly tempered my satisfaction by asking me if I had heard that the Earl of Saxmundham was going to divorce his wife. The question gave me a great shock, not so much on account of the blow it dealt at an old idol still conventionally enthroned in my memory as the last love of my life, as because I knew how much distress such a report must cause to poor old Edgar.

I was quite relieved, on entering the drive, to meet my stalwart friend and his faithful companion, both very merry over some joke which had already made Mr. Fussell purple in the face. On seeing us they burst out laughing afresh. I guessed what the joke was.

'Deuced lonely up here, isn't it?' said Mr. Fussell to me. 'No society, nothing but books, books,—except for one short fortnight in the year. Eh, Maude?'

'Eh? eh? what's this?' said Fabian.

'His only books are woman's looks,' and I wonder they didn't teach him the folly of bringing a band of gay and dashing cavaliers to read them too,' said Edgar.

Fabian turned slowly round to me, with a look of extreme pain, and shook his head mournfully.

'Oh, what a tangled web we weave,' he murmured sorrowfully, and then began to

dance the Highland fling, with his rug tartanwise over his shoulder.

Maurice Browne gravely cocked his hat, pulled down his cuffs, buttoned up his coat, and requesting Edgar to carry his bag, proceeded up the drive with his hands in his pockets, whistling.

In fact the whole quartett had given themselves up to ribald gaiety at my expense, and my explanation that I had merely given a poor lady and her daughter shelter for the winter in an unused cottage only provoked another explosion. It was understood that at these bachelor meetings all rules of social decorum should be scrupulously violated, so there was nothing for it but to join in the mirth with the best grace I could.

'You know who it is,' I said, half aside, to Fabian, hoping to turn him at least into an ally. 'It's poor little Mrs. Ellmer, the wife of that drunken painter.'

But Fabian was flinty. Turning towards the rest, with his expiring Romeo expression, he wailed: 'Oh, gentlemen, he is adding insult to injury; he is loading with abuse the bereaved husband of this lady to whom he has given shelter for the winter!'

'Which winter? How much winter?' asked the others.

The more they saw that I was getting really pained by their chaff the worse it became, until Fabian, stalking gravely up to Ferguson, who stood on the doorstep, pointed tragically in the direction of nowhere in particular, and said, in a sepulchral voice—

'You are a Scotchman, so am I. I have been pained by stories of orgies, debaucheries, and general goings on in this neighbourhood. Tell me, on your word as a fellow-countryman, can these gentlemen and myself, as churchwardens and Sunday-school teachers, enter this house without loss of self-respect?'

'I dinna ken aboot self-respect, gentlemen; but if you don't come in, ye'll stand the loss of a varra good dinner,' answered Ferguson, with a welcoming twinkle in his eyes.

'I am satisfied,' said Fabian, entering precipitately.

And the rest followed without scruple.

At dinner, to my relief, they found other subjects for their tongues to wag upon; for Maurice Browne, never being satisfied long with any topic but literary 'shop,' brought realism up again, and there ensued a triangular battle. For Edgar, who, now that he had passed the age and weight for cricket, had grown distressingly intellectual, was an ardent admirer of the modern American school of fiction in which nothing ever happens, and in which nobody is anything in particular for long at a time. He hungrily devoured all the works of that

desperately clever gentleman who maintains that 'a woman standing by a table is an incident,' and looked down from an eminence of six feet two of unqualified disdain on the 'battle, murder, and sudden death' school on the one hand, and on the 'all uncleanness' school on the other. Not at all crushed by his scorn, Fabian retorted by calling the American school the 'School of Foolish Talking,' and the battle raged till long past sundown, Mr. Fussell and I watching the case on behalf of the general reader, and passing the decanters till the various schools all became 'mixed schools.'

At this point a diversion was created by a fleeting view caught through the door by Fabian, of Janet carrying dishes away to the kitchen. He heaved a sigh of relief, and, with upturned eyes, breathed gently, 'I would trust him another winter!'

I had bought a piano at Aberdeen, as

Fabian had spread a report that he could play, while all my guests nursed themselves in the belief that they could sing. The instrument had been placed in a corner of my study against the wall. But the Philistinism of this so shocked Fabian that he instantly directed its removal into the middle of the room. This necessitated a re-disposal of most of the furniture. The centre table was piled high with my private papers. Fabian looked hastily through these, and, observing, 'I don't see anything here we need keep,' tumbled them all into the grate where the fire, indispensable as evening draws on in the Highlands, was burning. Mechanically, I saved what I could, while Fabian's subversive orders were being carried out round me. After a few minutes' hard work, all my favourite objects were out of sight. Maurice Browne was reclining comfortably in my own particular chair, and

most of the rest of the seats having been turned out into the hall as taking up too much room, I had to sit upon To-to's kennel. The curtains were also pulled down in deference to a suggestion of Browne's that they interfered with the full sound of the voice, but I wished they had been left up when the caterwauling began.

Mr. Fussell led off with 'The Stirrup Cup,' in deference to his being the eldest of the party, and also to purchase his non-intervention when the other performers should begin. It was some time before he got a fair start, being afflicted with hoarseness, which he attributed to the Highland air, and the rest unanimously to the Highland whiskey. When at last he warmed to his work, however, and said complacently that he was 'all right' now, they must have heard him at Aberdeen. He had a good baritone voice, the value of which was discounted by

his total ignorance of the art of singing, his imperfect acquaintance with both the time and the words of his songs, and his belief that the louder one shouted the better one sang. When at last, crimson and panting, but proud of himself, he sat down amid the astonished comments of the company on the strength of the roof, Maurice Browne wailed forth in a cracked voice a rollicking Irish song to the accompaniment of 'Auld Robin Gray'; Fabian followed with no voice at all, but no end of expression, in a pathetic love-song of his own composition, during which everybody went to look for some cigars he had in his overcoat pocket. I refused altogether to perform, and nobody pressed me; but I had my revenge. When Edgar, strung up to do or die, asked Fabian to accompany him with 'The Death of Nelson,' and rose with the modest belief that he should astonish them with a very fine bass, the first note was

a deep-mouthed roar that broke down the last twig of our forbearance, and we all rose as one man and declared that we had had music enough. Poor Ta-ta, who had been turned out of the room at the beginning of the concert for emulating the first singer by a prolonged howl, was let in again, and relief having been given to everybody's artistic yearnings, we ended the evening with smoke and peace.

Next morning we were all early on the moors, where we distinguished ourselves in various ways. Fabian, who worked himself into a fearful state of excitement over the sport, shot much and often, but brought home nothing at all, and thanked Heaven, when calmness returned with the evening hours, for keeping his fellow-creatures out of the range of his wild gun. Maurice Browne made a good mixed bag of a hedgehog, a pee-wit, and a keeper's leg, and then

complained that shooting was monotonous work. Edgar worked hard and gravely, but was so slow that for the most part the grouse were out of sight before he fired. Mr. Fussell did better, and attributed every failure to bring down his bird to his 'd—d glasses,' upon which Fabian hastened to ask him if he meant the glasses of the night before.

However, everybody but the keeper who was shot, declared himself delighted with the day's sport; but on the following morning Fabian and Maurice Browne seceded from the party and amused themselves, the former by sketching, the latter by learning by heart, by means of chats with ostlers and shopkeepers, the *chronique scandaleuse* of the neighbourhood; in the evening he triumphantly informed me that the morals of the lowest haunts in Paris were immaculate, compared to those of my simple Highland

village. I am afraid this startling revelation had less effect upon me than a little incident which I witnessed next day.

I had been congratulating myself upon the fact that, though all my visitors vied with each other in attentions to Mrs. Ellmer, who had become, under the influence of this sudden rush of admirers, gayer and giddier than ever, they looked upon Babiole, as her mother had prophesied, merely as a little girl and of no account. But on the morning referred to, I came upon Fabian and the child together in my garden at the foot of the hill. He was fastening some roses in the front of her blue cotton frock, and when he had done so, and stepped back a few paces to admire the effect, he claimed a kiss as a reward for his trouble. She gave it him shyly but simply. She was only a child, of course, and his little sweetheart of six years ago; and the blush that rose in her

cheeks when she caught sight of me was no sign of self-consciousness, for her colour came and went at the faintest emotion of surprise or pleasure. As for Fabian, he drew her hand through his arm, and came skipping towards me like a stage peasant.

'We're going to be married, Babiole and I, as soon as we've saved up money enough,' said he.

And the child laughed, delighted with this extravagant pleasantry.

But, though I laughed too, I didn't see any fun in it at all; for the remembrance that the time would come when this little blossom of youth and happiness and all things fresh and sweet would be plucked from the hillside, was not in the least amusing to me. And when this young artist proceeded to devote his mornings to long rambles with 'the child,' and his afternoons to making sketches of 'the child,' I thought

his attentions would be much better bestowed on a grown-up person. But as Mrs. Ellmer saw nothing to censure in all this I could not interfere. It spoilt my yearly holiday for me, though, in an unaccountable fashion; and when at the end of a fortnight my guests went away, no regrets that I felt at their departure were so keen as my ridiculous annoyance on seeing that Fabian's farewell kiss to his little sweetheart left the child in tears.

CHAPTER X

WITH the departure of my summer visitors, a gloom fell upon us all at Larkhall. Mrs. Ellmer missed her admirers and grew petulant; Babiole had discovered some new haunt, and was never to be found; while I felt the wanderer's fever growing strong upon me again. Fabian Scott had cleared up the little mystery concerning the husband and father of my tenants. It appeared that Mr. Ellmer, while neglecting and ill-using his wife without scruple when she was under the same roof with him, was subject to strong fits of conjugal devotion when two or three months of hard work, away from him, gave

him reason to think that she would be in possession of a few pounds of carefully-gleaned savings, while he, her lawful and once adored husband, did not know where to turn for a glass of beer. During the winter before I found them in Aberdeen some friends with whom both mother and child had taken refuge from his drunken fury had had to pay him a heavy ransom for their kindness, besides exposing themselves to the inconvenience of having their house mobbed and their windows broken whenever the tender husband and father, having exhausted the tribute paid to keep him in the public-house, bethought himself of this new way of calling attention to his wrongs.

Fabian told me that a few weeks back he had been accosted in the Strand by Mr. Ellmer, who was looking more tattered and dissipated than ever. This gentleman had experienced great concern at the total dis-

appearance of his wife, had asked Fabian's advice as to the best means of finding her, and had finally let out his conviction that she was 'doing well for herself,' in a tone of bitter indignation. Fabian had said nothing of this meeting to Mrs. Ellmer, being, both for her sake and for mine, anxious not to touch those strings of sentiment which, in the better kind of women, sound so readily for the most good-for-nothing of husbands.

Already Mrs. Ellmer had begun to allude with irritating frequency to the talents and noble qualities of her 'poor husband,' whom it was the fashion among us all to consider as the 'victim of art,' as if art had been a chronic disease. This fiction had gone on expanding and developing until the illustrious artist, to whom absence was so becoming, had eclipsed the entire Royal Academy, and had become to his wife a source of legitimate pride which, if touching by its

naïveté, was also wearisome by its excess.

Between proud reminiscences of her husband and happy memories of her late flirtations with Mr. Fussell and Mr. Browne, Mrs. Ellmer was rather disposed to treat me and my modest friendship as of small account. So the worm turned at last, by which I mean that I spent my days deer-stalking, grouse-shooting, and salmon-fishing, and my evenings with To-to, Ta-ta, and my books. This estrangement helped me to make up my mind to leave Larkhall for Italy before the winter came on, and a sharp frost in the last days of October sent me off to Aberdeen to make inquiries about my proposed journey. I would install Mrs. Ellmer and her daughter at the Hall, if they cared to remain, so that, at any rate, they would be housed out of harm's—that is, Mr. Ellmer's—way for the winter.

Janet had particularly entreated me to be back early, as there had been ghostly noises of late in the region of the drawing-room; and though her braw laddie, John, was ample protection against bodily intruders, yet, in the case of wraiths, though I only rented the place, and therefore could have no family influence with the spirits of departed owners, I was likely, through my superior social standing, to get a better hearing from the phantoms of gentlefolk than the staunchest man-servant could hope to do.

It was past six, and already dark, when I came back and went into the study, attracted by sounds of a very elementary performance on the piano. But there was perfect silence as I entered, and no human creature to be seen. Ta-ta, however, was hovering about near the piano, now replaced in its original position in a corner against the wall. I suspected the identity of the musical ghost, and

quietly seated myself by the fireplace to see what would happen. First, Ta-ta ran excitedly backwards and forwards between me and the other side of the table; then slight sounds as of stealthy creeping feet and hands were followed by a fleeting apparition of a female figure on all fours between the table and the screen.

'What are you running away for?' I asked, very gently.

Babiole was so much startled by the voice that she reappeared involuntarily, on her feet this time, from behind the screen.

'I beg your pardon, Mr. Maude, indeed I'm very sorry,' she began, 'I didn't think you would be in so soon.'

'And what have I done that you should be so sorry to see me?'

'Oh no, I didn't mean that. I'm not sorry to see you, I'm always glad to, only we never do now, you know, and I thought

perhaps you would be angry at my coming into your study,' said she, recovering confidence, as she saw that I was not displeased.

'Oh, so you took advantage of my being away to do what you thought I should not like?'

I spoke playfully, but Babiole hung her head.

'Well, what have you got to say for yourself?'

After a few moments' silence she raised her head, staring before her with the fixed and desperate earnestness of a sensitive young creature who thinks the slightest blame a terrible thing to bear.

'I don't believe it was so very wrong,' she said at last. 'I was so very careful; I took off my boots that I had been out on the hills in, and put on clean shoes, not to hurt the carpet; and I just put down the notes so lightly I could not have hurt the piano, and I washed my hands before touching the books.'

'The books! What books have you been touching?'

'Oh, I took down several; but I couldn't read all, because they were not English.'

This was satisfactory as far as it went; but then the best English authors are considered scarcely more suitable reading for 'the young person' than the worst French ones.

'And which do you like best of the English ones?'

'I like one I found yesterday, all letters from different people, with the s's like f's.'

I poked the fire into a blaze, and led the girl back to the book-shelves.

'Now, show me which one you mean.'

She hesitated, and looked at me, at first suspecting some trap. As I waited quietly, she at last timidly touched a volume of *The Tattler*. I pointed to a modern 'popular novel,' with a picture-cover and popular

title, which was among the lumber of the shelves.

'Have you read that?'

'Yes,' indifferently.

'Didn't you like that better than *The Tattler?*'

'Oh no!' indignantly.

'Why not? It is all about an actress.'

'An actress!' contemptuously. 'It isn't like any of the actresses I've ever met. It's a silly book.'

'Is there any other book you like?'

'Oh yes. I like these.' She passed her hand lovingly over a row—not an unbroken row, of course—of solid-looking calf-bound volumes, full of old-fashioned line engravings of British scenery, the text containing a discursive account of the places illustrated, enlivened by much historical information, apocryphal anecdote, and old-world scandal. 'And *Jane Eyre*, and this.' 'This' was an

illustrated translation of *Don Quixote.* 'Oh, and I like *Clarissa Harlowe* and that book with the red cover.'

'*Ivanhoe?*'

'Oh yes, *Ivanhoe,*' she repeated carefully after me. Evidently, as in the case of *Don Quixote,* she had been uncertain how to pronounce the title.

'And these?' I pointed, one by one, to some modern novels. 'Don't you like any of these?' Already I began to be alarmed at the extent of her reading.

'Yes, I like some of them—pretty well.'

'Why do you like *Don Quixote* and *Ivanhoe* better?'

She considered for a long time, her blue eyes fixed thoughtfully on the shelves.

'I think I feel more as if they'd really happened.'

'But when you were reading *Armadale,* didn't you feel as if that had happened?'

'Oh yes,' with a flash of excitement. 'One night I couldn't sleep, because I thought of it so much.'

'Then you thought as much about it as about *Ivanhoe?*'

'Ye-es, but——' A pause. 'I thought about *Ivanhoe* because I wanted to, and I thought about *Armadale* because I couldn't help it.'

I went on asking her what she had read, and I own that I dare not give the list. But her frank young mind had absorbed no evil, and when I asked her how she liked one famous peccant hero, she answered quite simply—

'I liked him very much—part of the book. And when he did wrong things, I was always wanting to go to him, and tell him not to be so wicked and silly; and then, oh! I was so glad when he reformed and married Sophia.'

'But he wasn't good enough for her.'

'Ah, but then he was a man!' Her tone implied '*only* a man.'

'Then you think women are better than men?'

'I think they ought to be.'

'Why?'

'Well, men have to work, and women have only to be good.'

I was surprised at this answer.

'That is not true always. Your mother is a very good woman, and has had to work very hard indeed.'

'But mamma's an exception; she says so. And she says it's very hard to work as she does, and be good too.'

I could scarcely help laughing, though it was pretty to see how innocently the young girl had taken the querulous speech.

'Well, and then I'm a man, and I don't have to work.'

'Perhaps that's why you're so good.'

I was so utterly astonished at this naïve speech that I had nothing to say. The blood rushed to the girl's face; she was afraid she had been rude.

'How do you know that I am good, Babiole?' I asked gently.

But this was taxing her penetration too much.

'I don't know,' she answered shyly.

'Why do you think people are better when they don't work?'

She looked at me, and was reassured that I was not offended.

'Well, sometimes when mamma has been working very hard—not now, you know; but it used to be like that—she used to say things that hurt me, and made me want to cry. And then I used to look at her poor tired face and say to myself, "It's the hard work and not mamma that says those things;" and then, of course, I did not mind. And when

you have once had to work too hard, you never get over it as you do over other things.'

'What other things?'

'Oh—fancies and—and things like that.'

'Love troubles?'

She looked up at me with a shy, sideways glance that was full of the most perfectly unconscious witchery.

'Yes, mamma says they're nonsense.'

'She liked nonsense, too, once.'

Babiole looked up at me with the delight of a common perception.

'Yes, I've often thought that. And then all men are not like——'

She stopped short.

'Papa?'

She shook her head. 'One mustn't say that. One must make allowances for clever people, mamma says.'

'You will be clever, too, some day, if you

go on reading and thinking about what you read.'

'No, I don't want to be clever; it makes people so selfish. But,' with a sigh, 'I wish I knew something, and could play and sing and read all those books that are not English.'

'Shall I teach you French?'

'Will you? Oh, Mr. Maude!'

I think she was going to clap her hands with delight, but remembered in time the impropriety of such a proceeding. Four o'clock next day was fixed as the hour for the first lesson, and in the meantime I made another journey to Aberdeen to provide myself with a whole library of French grammars and other elementary works.

At four o'clock Babiole made her appearance, very scrupulously combed and washed, and wearing the air of intense seriousness befitting such a matter as the beginning of

one's education. This almost broke down, however, under the glowing excitement of taking a phrase-book into one's hand, and repeating after me, 'Good-day, *bon-jour;* How do you do? *Comment vous portez-vous?*' and a couple of pages of the same kind. Then she wrote out the verb 'To have' in French and English; and her appetite for knowledge not being yet quenched, she then learnt and wrote down the names of different objects round us, some of which, I regret to say, her master had to find out in the dictionary, not being prepared to give off-hand the French for 'hearthrug,' letter-weight,' and 'wainscoting.' We then went through the names of the months and the seasons of the year, after which, surfeited with information, she gave a little sigh of completed bliss, and, looking up at me, said simply that she thought that was as much as she could learn perfectly by to-morrow. I

thought it was a great deal more, but did not like to discourage her by saying so. I had much doubt about my teaching, having been plunged into it suddenly without having had time to formulate a method; but then I was convinced that by the time I felt more sure of my powers my pupil's zeal would have melted away, and I should have no one to experimentalise upon. As soon as I had assured her that she had done quite enough for the first lesson, Babiole rose, collected the formidable pile of books, her exercise-book, and the pen I had consecrated to her use, and asked me where she should keep them. We decided upon a corner of the piano as being a place where they would not be in my way, Babiole having a charmingly feminine reverence for the importance of even the most frivolous occupations of the stronger sex. After this she thanked me very gravely and prettily for my kindness in

teaching her, and hastened away, evidently in the innocent belief that I must be anxious to be alone.

What a light the bright child seemed to have left in the musty room! I began to smile to myself at the remembrance of her preternatural gravity, and Ta-ta put her fore-paws on my knees and wagged her tail for sympathy. I thought it very probable that Mrs. Ellmer would interfere to prevent the girl's coming again, or that Babiole's enthusiasm for learning would die out in a day or two, and I should be left waiting for my pupil with my grammars and dictionaries on my hands.

However, she reappeared next day, absolutely perfect in the verb *avoir*, the months, the seasons, and the pages out of the phrase-book. When I praised her she said, with much warmth—

'I could have learnt twice as many

phrases if I'd known how to pronounce them!'

In fact, beginning to learn at an age when she was able to understand, and impelled by a strong sense of her own deficiencies, she learnt so fast and so well that her education soon became the strongest interest of my life, and when my fear that she would tire had worn away, I gave whole hours to considering what I should teach her, and to preparing myself for her lessons. As winter drew on, the darkening days gave us both the excuse we wanted for longer working hours. From three to half-past six we now sat together in the study, reading, writing, translating. When I found her willing I had added Latin to her studies, and we diligently plodded through a course of reading arbitrarily marked out by me, and followed by my pupil with enthusiastic docility.

All thoughts of leaving Ballater for the

winter had now disappeared from my mind. I was happier in my new occupation than I remembered to have been before, and as I saw spring approaching, I regretted the short days, which had been brighter to me than midsummer.

'I mustn't keep you indoors so long now, Babiole,' I said to her one afternoon in the first days of April. 'I have been making you work too hard lately, and you must go and get back your roses on the hills.'

I saw the light come over the girl's face as she looked out of the window, and, with a pang of self-reproach, I felt that, in spite of herself, the earnest little student had been waiting eagerly for some such words as these.

'O—h—h,' she whispered, in a long-drawn breath of pleasure, 'it must be lovely up among the pine-woods now!'

I said nothing, and she turned round to

me with a mistrustful inquiring face. I went on looking over an exercise she had written, as if absorbed in that occupation. But the little one's perceptions were too keen for me. She was down on her knees on the floor beside my chair in a moment, with a most downcast face, her eyes full of tears.

'Oh, Mr. Maude, what an ungrateful little wretch you must think me!'

I was so much moved that I could not take her pretty apology quietly. I burst out into a shout of laughter.

'Why, Babiole, you must think me an ogre! You don't really imagine I wanted to keep you chained to the desk all the summer!'

She took my hand in both of hers and stroked it gently.

'I would rather never go on the hills again than seem ungrateful to you, Mr. Maude.'

'Ungrateful, child! You don't know how your little sunbeam face has brightened this old room.'

'Has it, really?' She seemed pleased, but rather puzzled. 'Well, I'm very glad. but that doesn't make it any the less kind of you to teach me.'

'There has been no kindness at all on my side, I assure you.'

She shook her head, and her curly hair touched my shoulder.

'Yes, there has, and I like to think that there has. Nobody knows how good you are but Ta-ta and me; we often talk about you when we're out together, don't we, Ta-ta?'

The collie wagged her tail violently, taking this little bit of affectionate conversation as a welcome relief to the monotony of our studies.

'Well, I shall leave Ta-ta with you,

then, to keep my memory green while I'm away.'

'Away! Are you going away?'

'Yes. I am going to Norway for the summer.'

I could not tell exactly when I made up my mind to this, but I know that I had had no intention of the kind when Babiole came into my study that afternoon. She remained quite silent for a few minutes. Then she asked softly—

'When will you come back, Mr. Maude?'

'Oh, about—September, I think.'

'The place won't seem the same without you.'

'Why, child, when you are about on the hills I never see you.'

'No, but—but I always have a feeling that the good genius is about, and—do you know, I think I shall be afraid to take such long walks alone with Ta-ta when you're not here!'

My heart went out to the child. With a passionate joy in the innocent trust one little human creature felt towards me, the outcast, I was on the point of telling her, as carelessly as I could, that I had not quite made up my mind yet, when she broke the spell as unwittingly as she had woven it.

'Oh, Mr. Maude,' she cried, with fervent disappointment; 'then your friends — Mr. Scott—and the rest—they won't come here this year?'

'No,' said I coolly, but with no sign of the sudden chill her words had given me, 'I shall invite them to Norway this year.'

Before April was over I had installed Mrs. Ellmer as caretaker at Larkhall, and, with Ferguson at my heels, had set out on my wanderings again.

CHAPTER XI

If I went away to appease the restlessness which had attacked me so suddenly, to persuade myself that the secret of happiness for me lay in never remaining long in the same place, I succeeded badly.

It was not until I was three hundred miles away from them that I began fully to appreciate the joys of domestic life with To-to and Ta-ta, the comfort of being able to keep my books together, the supreme blessing of sitting every evening in the same arm-chair. I was surprised by this at first, till I reflected that the very loneliness of my life was bound to bring middle age upon me early. There

was a period of each day which I found it very hard to get through; whether in Paris, enjoying coffee and cigarette at a café on the boulevards, or in Norway, watching the sunset on some picturesque fiord, when the day began to wane I grew restless, and, referring aimlessly to my watch again and again, could settle down to nothing till the last rays of daylight had faded away.

My four friends, when they joined me for our yearly holiday, all decided that something was wrong, but that was as far as they could agree. For while both Fabian and Edgar said that it was 'liver,' the former recommended camel-exercise in the Soudan, the latter would hear of nothing but porridge and Strathpeffer. And though both the fat Mr. Fussell and the lean Mr. Browne leaned to the sentimental view that love and Mrs. Ellmer were at the root of my malady, the

latter suggested that to shut Mr. Ellmer up with a hogshead of new whisky and then to marry his widow would quench my passion effectually, while Mr. Fussell, with an indescribable smile, told me to go back to Paris and 'enjoy myself'; and, if I didn't know how, I was to take him.

I did none of these things, however, but after my friends had returned to England, I wandered about until late October. But when the days grew short again, the home-hunger grew irresistibly strong, and I went back to the Highlands, as a gambler goes back to the cards. Of course I knew what took me there, just when the hills were growing bleak, and the deer had gone to their winter retreat in the forests. I wanted to see that girl's face in my study again, to hear the young voice that rang with youth and happiness and every quality that makes womanhood sweet and loveworthy in a man's mind. She

might conjugate Latin verbs or tell me her young girl love affairs, as she had done sometimes with ringing laughter, but I must hear her voice again.

So I arrived at Ballater without warning, and leaving Ferguson at the station to order a fly and come on with my luggage, I walked to Larkhall in the dusk. There was a lamp in the study; I could see it plainly enough, for the blind was not drawn down. I saw a figure pass between the window and the light; in another minute the front door opened, and Ta-ta rushed at me, leaping on to my shoulders, and barking joyously; while Babiole herself, scarcely less fleet of foot, seized both my hands, crying in joyous welcome—

'Mr. Maude! Mr. Maude! Mr. Maude!'

I said, 'How are you? I hope you are quite well. Isn't it cold?' But, indeed, no furnace-fire could have sent such a glow

through my veins as the warm-hearted pressure of the girl's hands.

'Do you know, I have a sort of feeling that I *knew* you were coming to-day? The Scotch believe in second sight; perhaps it's a gift of the country. I've had all day a presentiment that something was going to happen—something *nice*, you know; and just now, before you were near enough for me to hear your step, some impulse made me get up and look out of the window. And, Mr. Maude, don't you believe mamma if she says Ta-ta moved first, because she didn't; it was I. There's always something in the air before the good genius appears, you know.'

And she laughed very happily as she led me in and gravely introduced me to her mother. Both had been knitting stockings for me, and I thought the study had never looked so warm or so home-like as it did

with their work-baskets and wools about, and with these two good little women making kindly welcoming uproar around me. To-to broke his chain, and climbed up on my shoulder, snarling and showing his teeth jealously at Babiole. The delighted clamour soothed my ears as no prima donna's singing had ever done. That evening I could have embraced Mrs. Ellmer with tenderness.

Next day I was alone in the drawing-room, the ladies having given up possession of the Hall and returned to the cottage, when I heard footsteps at the open door and a voice—

'May I come in, Mr. Maude?'

'Certainly.'

I was busy putting up two paintings of Norwegian scenery in place of the portraits of Lady Helen, which were on the ground against the wall. On seeing my occupation, Babiole uttered a short cry of surprise and

dismay. I said nothing, but put my head on one side to see if one of my new pictures was hung straight. At last she spoke—

'Oh, Mr. Maude!' was all she said, in a tone of timid reproach.

'Well.'

'You're not going to take her down after all this time?'

'You see I have taken her down.'

'Oh, why?' It was not curiosity; it was entreaty.

'Don't you think she's been up there long enough?'

'If you were the woman and she were the man you wouldn't say that.'

'What should I say?'

'You would say, "He's been up there so long that, whatever he's done, he may as well stay there now."'

'That would be rather contemptuous tolerance, wouldn't it?'

'But the picture wouldn't know that; and if the original should ever grow sorry for all the harm she—he had done, it would be something to know that the picture still hung there just the same.'

The story must have leaked out, then—the first part through Fabian, probably, and the rest through the divorce court columns of the daily papers. I said nothing in answer to the girl's pleadings, but I restored the portraits to their old places with the excuse that the landscapes would look better in the dining-room.

Our studies began again that very afternoon. Babiole had forgotten nothing, though work had, of course, grown slack during the hot days of the summer. She had had another and rather absorbing love affair, too, the details of which I extracted with the accompaniment of more blushes than in the old days.

'We shall have you getting married and flying away from us altogether, I suppose, now, before we know where we are.'

'No,' she protested stoutly, 'I'm not going to marry; I am going to devote myself to art.'

Upon this I made her fetch her sketch-book, after promising 'not to tell mamma,' who might well be forgiven for a prejudice against any more members of her family sacrificing themselves to this Juggernaut. The sketches were all of fir and larch-tree, hillside and rippling stony Dee; some were in pencil, some in water-colour; there was love in every line of each of the little pictures, and there was something more.

'Why, Babiole, you're going to be a great artist, I believe,' I cried, as I noticed the vigour of the outlines, the imaginative charm of the treatment of her favourite corners of rock and forest.

'Oh no, not that,' she said deprecatingly.

'If I can be only a little one I shall be satisfied. I should never dare to draw the big hills. When I get on those hills along the Gairn and see the peaks rising the one behind the other all round me, I feel almost as if I ought to fall on my knees only to look at them; it is only when we have crept down into some cleft full of trees, where I can peep at them from round a corner, that I feel I can take out my paper and my paint-box without disrespect.'

'But you can be a great artist without painting great things. You may paint Snowdon so that it is nothing better than a drawing-master's copy, and you may paint a handful of wild flowers so that it may shame acres of classical pot-boilers hung on the line at the Royal Academy.'

Babiole was thoughtfully silent for some minutes after this, while I turned over the rest of her drawings.

'Drawing-master's copy!' she repeated slowly at last. 'Then a drawing-master is a man who doesn't draw very well, or who isn't very particular how he teaches what he knows?'

'Yes, without being very severe I think we may say that.'

'That is not like your teaching, Mr. Maude.'

'What do you mean?'

'Why, all these months that you've been away I've had a lot of time to think, and I see what a different thing you have made of life to me by teaching me to understand things. Last year I thought of nothing when I was out on the hills with Ta-ta but childish things—stories and things like that. And now all the while I think of the things that are going on in the great world, the pictures that are being painted, the books that are being written.'

'And the dresses that are being worn?' I suggested playfully, not at all sure that the change she was so proud of was entirely for the better.

'Well, yes, I think I should like to know that too,' she admitted, with a blush.

'And you want to attribute all that to my teaching?'

'Yes, Mr. Maude,' she answered, laughing; 'you must bear the blame of it all.'

'Well, look here; I've re-visited the world since you have, and, believe me, you are much better outside. It's a horrid, over-crowded, noisy place, and, as for the artists in whom you are so much interested, you must worship them from afar if you want to worship them at all. Painters, actors, writers, and the rest —the successful ones are snobs, the unsuccessful—sponges. And as for the dresses, my child, there was never a frock sent out of

Bond Street so pretty, so tasteful, or so becoming as the one you have on.'

But Babiole glanced down at her blue serge gown rather disdainfully, and there shone in her eyes, as brightly as ever, that vague hunger of a woman's first youth for emotions and pleasures, which every morning's sunshine seemed to promise her, and whose names she did not know.

'Ah,' she said gaily, 'but everybody doesn't speak like that. I shall wait until your friends come in the summer, and see what they tell me about it.'

My face clouded, and, with the pretty affectionateness with which she now always treated me, she assured me that she did not really want any advice but mine, and that, as long as I was good enough to teach her, she was content to read the lessons of the busy world through my eyes.

Meanwhile, however, I was myself, through

those same eyes of mine, learning a far more dangerous lesson, and one, unluckily, which I could never hope to impart to any woman. I had no one but myself to thank for my folly, into which I had coolly walked with my eyes open. But the temptation to direct that fair young mind had been too strong for me, and, having once indulged in the pleasure, the few months away had but increased my craving to taste it again. This second winter we worked even harder than the first. Babiole, with her expanding mind, and the passionate excitement she began to throw into every pursuit, became daily a more fascinating pupil. She would slide down from her chair on to a footstool at my side when discussion grew warm between us concerning an interesting chapter we had been reading. She would put her hand on my shoulder with affectionate persuasion if I disagreed with her, or tap my fingers impatiently to hurry

my expression of opinion. How could she know that the ugly grave man, with furrows in his scarred face, and already whitening hair, was young and hot-blooded too, with passions far stronger than hers, and all the stronger from being iron-bound?

Sometimes I felt tempted to let her know that I was twenty years younger than she, growing up in the belief of her childhood on that matter, innocently thought. But it could make no difference, in the only way in which I cared for it to make a difference, and it might render her constrained with me. After all, it was my comparative youth which enabled me to enter into her feelings, as no dry-as-dust professor of fifty could have done, and it was upon that sympathy that the bond between us was founded. In the happiness this companionship brought to me, I thought I had lulled keener feelings to sleep, when, as spring came back, and I was beginning

again to dread the return of the long days, an event happened which made havoc of the most cherished sentiments of all three of us.

The first intimation of this revolution was given by Ferguson, who informed me at luncheon, with a solemnly indignant face, that a 'varra disreputable-looking person' had been pestering him with inquiries for Mr. Maude, and, after having the door shut in his face had taken himself off, so Ferguson feared, in the direction of the cottage, to bother the ladies. My butler's dislike of Mrs. Ellmer had broken down under her constant assistance to Janet.

'I saw that Jim was aboot the stable, sir, so I have nae doot he helped the gentleman awa' safe eno',' added Ferguson grimly.

I thought no more of the incident, which the butler had reported simply because up among the hills the sight of an unknown face is an event.

But at four o'clock Babiole did not appear; I sat waiting, looking through the pages of Green's *Short History of the English People*, on which we were then engaged, for twenty minutes; and then, almost alarmed at such an unusual occurrence, I was getting up to go and make inquiries at the cottage when I heard her well-known footstep through the open hall-door. Even before she came in I knew that something had happened, for instead of running in all eager, laughing apology, as was her way on the rare occasions when she was a few minutes late, I heard her cross the hall very slowly and hesitate at the door.

'Come in, come in, Babiole; what's the matter?' I cried out impatiently.

She came in then quickly, and held out her hand to me as she wished me good-afternoon. But there was no smile on her face, and the light seemed to have gone out of her eyes.

'What is it, child? Something has happened,' said I, as I drew her down into her usual chair.

She shook her head, and tried to laugh, but suddenly broke down, and, bursting into tears, leaned her face against her hands and sobbed bitterly.

I was horribly distressed. I tried some vague words of consolation for the unknown evil, and laid my hand lightly on one heaving shoulder, only to withdraw it as if seared by the touch. Then I sat down quietly and waited, while Ta-ta, more daring, set up a kindly howl of sympathetic lamentation, which happily caused a diversion.

'I ought to be ashamed of myself,' she said, sitting upright, and drying her eyes. 'I don't know what you must think of me, Mr. Maude.'

'I don't think anything of you,' I said at random, being far too much distressed by her

unhappiness to think of any words more appropriate. 'Now, tell me, what is the matter?'

I was in no hurry for the answer, for I had already a very strong presentiment what it would be.

'Papa has found us out; he's at the cottage now.'

But he was even nearer, as a heavy tread on the stone steps outside the front door at this moment told us. Babiole jumped up, with her cheeks on fire and her lips parted, rather as if prepared for the onslaught of a mad bull.

'H'm, h'm, no one about! And no knocker!' we heard a thick voice say imperiously, as my town-bred visitor stumped about the steps.

'Look here, Babiole; I think you'd better go, dear. Run through the back door, and comfort mamma.'

There was no use disguising the fact that our visitor's arrival was a common calamity She made one step away, but then turned back, clasped my right hand tightly, and whispered—

'Remember, you don't see him at his best. He's a very, very clever man, indeed —at home.'

Then she ran lightly away, without looking at me again, half-conscious, I am afraid, poor child, that her apology was but a lame one. I rose, and went to the hall to invite my visitor in.

CHAPTER XII

Mr. Ellmer's appearance had not improved with the lapse of years. He was dressed in the same brown overcoat that he had worn when I made his acquaintance seven years ago. It had been new then, it was very old, worn, and greasy now; still, I think it must have been in the habit of lying by for long periods, out of its owner's reach, or it could scarcely have held together so well. Mr. Ellmer wore a round-topped felt hat, a size too large for him, with a very wide and rather curly brim, from under which his long fair hair, which had the appearance of being kept in order by the occasional

application of pomatum rather than by the constant use of the comb, fell down over a paper collar in careless profusion. The same change for the worse was apparent in the man himself. His face was more bloated, his look more shifting, the whole man was more sodden and more swaggering than he had been seven years ago. If it had not been for the two poor little women so unluckily bound to him, I would not have tolerated such a repulsive creature even on my doorstep; but for the sake of making such terms with him as would rid us all of his obnoxious presence, I held out my hand, which he, after a moment's hesitation, took and dropped out of his fat flabby palm, with a look of horror at my scarred face.

'Will you come in?' said I, leading the way into the study, which he examined on entering with undisguised and contemptuous disappointment.

'Have you come far to-day, Mr. Ellmer?' I asked, handing him a chair, which I inwardly resolved for the future to dispense with, having sentimental feelings about the furniture of my favourite room.

'Yes, well I may say I have. All the way from Aberdeen. And it's a good pull up here from the station to a gentleman who's not used to much walking exercise.'

He spoke in a low thick voice, very difficult to hear and understand, his eyes wandering furtively from one object to another all the time.

'Did you have much difficulty in finding the place?'

'Oh yes. She had taken care to hide herself well.' And his face slowly contracted with a lowering and brutal expression. 'She thought I shouldn't find them up here. But I swore I would, and when I swear a thing it's as good as done.'

'I hope you found your wife and daughter looking well.'

'Oh, *they*'re well enough, of course; trust them to get fat and flourishing, while their husband and father may be starving!'

Now this was laughable; for whatever defects Mr. Ellmer's appearance might have, the leanness of starvation was not one of them.

'They were by no means fat and flourishing when I first met them, I assure you,' I said gravely.

The brute turned his eyes on me with slow and sullen ferocity.

'That was not my fault, sir,' he whispered with affected humility, being evidently far too stupid to know how his looks belied his words. 'They had been away from me for some time; my wife left me because I was unable to support her in luxury, the depression in art being very great at this moment,

sir. She took my child away from me to teach her to hate her own father, and to bring her up in her own extravagant notions.'

'She has cured herself of those now,' I said; 'she lives on the barest sum necessary to keep two people alive. It is, unfortunately, all I can spare her for her kindness in taking care of my cottage.'

This was true. I had often regretted that the poor lady's inflexible independence had made her refuse to accept more than enough for her and her daughter, with the strictest economy, to live upon. Now, I rejoiced to think that she had absolutely no savings to be sucked down into the greedy maw of the creature before me. My words were evidently the echo to some statement that had been already made to him. Naturally, he believed neither his wife nor me.

'It's an astonishing thing, then, that a woman should leave her husband just to

come and live like an old alms-house woman in a tumble-down cottage fifty miles farther than nowhere!'

I said nothing; indeed, I could not share his astonishment.

He went on with rising bluster, and louder, huskier voice.

'And look here, if I hadn't heard this great talk of your being such a gentleman, I don't know whether I shouldn't feel it my duty to call you to account.'

I rose to my feet, unable to sit still, but at once sat down again, afraid lest I might not be able to resist the advantage a standing position afforded for taking him by the collar and removing him to the flower-beds outside.

'You are at liberty to satisfy your marital anxiety by making any inquiries you please,' said I, and looked at the door.

'Don't be affronted, it was only chaff,'

said he. 'I know it's my daughter you're after. I saw her sneak out of here just as I came in by the back-way, as if ashamed to look her father in the face.'

'You d——d scoundrel! Get up and get out of the house,' I hissed out in a flash of uncontrollable rage.

He got up, and even made one slow step towards the door; but he did not go out, nor did he seem afraid of me. He turned deliberately when he was close to the screen, and began to swing his walking-stick in the old way I remembered, regardless of the consequences in a room crowded with furniture and ornaments. Then he looked into his hat, and passed his hand thoughtfully round the lining. I was still at a white heat of indignation, but to lay violent hands on this stodgy and unresisting person would have been like football without the fun.

'Look here,' he said, when we had stood

in this unsatisfactory manner for some moments. His eyes were fixed upon his hat, round which his podgy hand still wandered. 'You're not taking me the right way. You don't like me, I can see. Well, one gentleman isn't bound to fly into the arms of another gentleman first go-off. Not at all; I don't expect it. I may like you, and I may not like you; but I don't fly at your throat and call you bad names by way of introducing myself, even though I do find my wife and daughter hiding away under the shadow of your wing, as it were, from their own husband and father.'

Here he looked up at me sideways with a slow nod, to emphasise the little lesson in good breeding which his example afforded.

Perceiving some show of reason in his words, and some touch of more genuine feeling in his manner, I said, 'Well!' and leaned against the chimney-piece. With

this encouragement he stepped back to the hearthrug again, and while To-to half-strangled himself in futile attempts to get at his trousers, he addressed to me the following discourse, with the forefinger of his right hand upraised, and the dusty point of his cane planted deeply in a satin cushion which Babiole had embroidered for my favourite chair.

'Look here,' he said, and for once his dull round eyes met mine with the straightforwardness of an honest conviction. 'Full-grown women are the devil. Either they're good or they're bad. If they're bad—well, we need say no more about them; if they're good, why—the less said about their goodness the better. But a young girl, before she's learnt a woman's tricks—and especially if she's your own flesh and blood—why that's different! And my little girl, for all she shows none too much affection for her father

(but that's her mother's doing), she's a little picture, and I'm proud of her. And if any infernal cad of a d——d gentleman was to be up to any nonsense with her, and so much as to put his —— hand on her pretty little head—look here, Mr. What-d'ye-call-'em, I'd make a d——d pulp of him!'

And Mr. Ellmer gripped my coat with a fierceness and looked into my face with a resolution which, in spite of the coarseness which had disfigured his speech, warmed my heart towards him. For, instead of the contemptible sodden cur of a few minutes ago, it was a man,—degraded by his course of life, but still a man, with a spark of the right fire in his heart,—who stood blinking steadily at me with a persistency which demanded an answer.

I freed my coat from his grasp, but without any show of annoyance, and answered him simply at once.

'You won't have to make pulp of anybody while your daughter lives at Ballater, Mr. Ellmer. I have watched her grow from a child into—into what she is now, something—to us who love her—between a fairy and an angel; and no father could take deeper interest in his own child than I do in her.'

'Deeper interest,' repeated Mr. Ellmer dubiously; 'No; I daresay not. But, excuse me, Mr.—Mr.——'

'Maude.'

'Yes, Mr. Maude, no offence to you, but you're a man yourself, you know.'

After the contumely with which he had treated me, the admission seemed quite a compliment. I made no attempt to deny it, and this reticence emboldened him.

'Now, why don't you marry her yourself?'

To have the wish which has been secretly gnawing at the foundations of your heart

suddenly brought face to face with you is a startling and confounding experience. I think no convicted ruffian can ever have looked more guiltily ashamed of himself than I, as I felt the hot blood mount to my head, and my brain swim with the first full consciousness of a futile passion. Of course, the man before me put the worst construction upon my evident confusion; he repeated in a louder and more blustering tone—

'Why don't you marry her?'

'In the first place,' said I quietly, 'she is scarcely more than a child, Mr. Ellmer.'

'That's not much of a fault, for she won't improve as she loses it. Besides, you needn't marry her at once.'

'In the second place, I am quite sure she wouldn't have me.'

'Why not? She seems to like you.'

'She does like me, as a beautiful girl may like a grandfather, battered and scarred in

war, or a homeless cur which she has picked up and which has grown attached to her. To be frank with you, Mr. Ellmer, nothing but my ugly face prevents me from becoming a suitor for your daughter; but that obstacle is one which, without any undue self-depreciation, I know to be one which makes happy marriage impossible for me.'

'I don't know,' said Mr. Ellmer, in a tone of generous encouragement; 'good looks don't always carry it off with the women. Look at my wife, now: well, to be sure, she was proud enough of getting me; but, do you think the feeling lasted? No, I might have been a one-eyed hunchback, sir, before we'd been man and wife three months! There's no knowing what those creatures will like, let alone the fact that they never like the same thing more than a week together—barring a miracle.'

And Mr. Ellmer looked at me, with his

head a little on one side, as if expecting that the narration of his experience would conclusively affect my views on matrimony. As I said nothing, however, being, indeed, too much involved in a whirlpool of doubts and longings and miserable certainties to have any neatly-turned phrases ready with which to carry on the conversation, he presently cleared his throat and went on again.

'You see,' he said, with an odd assumption of paternal dignity, which covered some genuine feeling as well as some genuine humbug, 'it isn't often that I can spare the time to take a journey as long as this. Therefore, when I do, I like to see something for my trouble. Well, and what I mean to see this time is one of two things: either I leave with the knowledge that my daughter is engaged to be married to an honourable gentleman who is able to support her, and willing to be good to her, or I leave

with my daughter herself, and I put her in the way of earning her own living on the stage, which is a more honourable position than playing lodgekeeper to any gentleman in the land.'

'And you would take her mother with her, of course?' I said, as easily as I could, with a sudden gloomy misgiving that Babiole, happy as she was among the hills, would snatch at the chance of rushing into the conflicts of the busier life in which she took such an ominous interest.

'Oh, she can do as she likes,' answered Mr. Ellmer with a sudden return, at mention of his wife, to sullen and brutal ferocity of look and tone.

I was horrorstruck at the possibility of my little fairy choosing to leave the shelter of the hillside under the protection of this man, whose caprice of paternal pride and affection might, I thought, at any moment of

drunken irritation or disappointment, change to the selfish cruelty with which he had treated his hard-working wife.

'Will you give me till to-morrow morning to think about it, and to speak to Babiole, Mr. Ellmer?' I asked, after a few moments' rapid thought. 'In the meantime we will do our best to make you comfortable, either here or at the cottage. Of course, I cannot prevent your saying what you please to your daughter, but I hope you will, in fairness to me, let me plead my own cause unbiassed by one word from you. The subject is one I know she has never dreamed of, and it will surprise and may even startle her very much. So that I may ask so much of you, and beg you to rely on my discretion.'

Mr. Ellmer seemed pleased with the success of his diplomacy, and he offered me a fat, pink, lazy hand to shake.

'Say no more, sir; between gentlemen

that is quite sufficient. And I should like to add, sir, that if everything should turn out as we both desire, you need have no fear of being put upon by your wife's relations, whatever Babiole's mother may say. The votaries of Art, sir, are used to poverty, and need not blush for it. But I should be glad to think that my devotion to it had brought only its dignity, and not its penalties, upon my daughter.'

I shook his hand heartily, almost feeling, for the moment, so deep was his own conviction, that this greasy person with the paper collar — whose language and sentiments, like an untuned musical instrument, could rise and fall to such unexpected heights and depths — was really treating me with a generous condescension for which I ought to be grateful.

I accompanied him to the door, and watched his ponderous figure making its way

to the cottage, near the entrance of which I saw his wife waiting for him; then I whistled to Ta-ta, who had followed the stranger for a few steps in order to get a better view of his retreat, and, taking my hat, went down the drive for a walk. It was past five, and the April sun was shining out a fair good-night to the hills after a day of rain; faint tufts of pale green were showing on the dark foliage of the larch-trees, and the daisies in the soft grass were beginning to take heart at the death of winter. One could think better in the fresh spring-scented air than between walls of solemn books. As for that, though, my plan of action was already decided on, and contemplation of it, even under the inspiration of the perfume of the firs, and the babble of the water over the stones of the Dee, resulted in no improvement on my first idea. This was no less than to make a formal proposal to Babiole, which she must

accept on the clear understanding that it was to form no tie upon her, but which would satisfy her father and allow her to remain still in the safe shelter of this nook among the hills. The girl was only fifteen, much too young for any serious love-ventures of her own, so that I argued that my engagement to her would be merely a most loyal guardianship which would reach its natural end when the handsome young prince should break his way through the enchanted forest and wake her up with the traditional kiss. Hope for myself, I can assuredly say, I had very little; and, if this modesty seems excessive in a man in the very prime of life, who, moreover, had already some sort of assured place in the esteem of the girl he loved, I can only say that there was a balance against me in the books of the sex which I was paying off to this one member of it, and, therefore, in proportion as I had felt myself to be too good

for the rest of those I had met, so I felt that Babiole Ellmer was too good for me. The matter was arranged in my own mind with very little trouble, and I was eager to unfold it to her. I had half expected to find her in the road through the fir-forest, knowing that after the day's rain the little maid must be thirsting for a long draught of the fresh sweet air—but no; I passed through it and out into the open country, over the stone bridge of Muick, skirted the Dee and crossed it again by Ballater Bridge into the village, without a glimpse of her.

The sun was getting low behind the hills when I reached the western foot of Craigendarroch, and, without a pause, began to climb between the glistening branches of the budding oak-trees up to the top. I had no distinct purpose in coming so far, and the faint bark of my own dog, which reached my ears as I was ascending the bare and rocky

space which separates the oak-grown lower slope from the fir-crowned summit of the hill, caused me to stop suddenly in surprise and excitement so sharp and so sudden that all the blood in my body seemed to rush to my head, and my heart to continue its action by unwonted, tumultuous leaps.

I pulled myself together, not without some consternation at the phenomenon.

'I came up the hill too fast,' I said to myself, and crept up the slabs of rock that now formed a wet and slippery footway among the firs, with a sensation of horror at the thought of Babiole's trusting her little feet on such a treacherous path.

At the top, a little way beyond the cairn, I came upon her suddenly. She was sitting on the trunk of a fallen tree, looking out to the western hills, across the slopes of which were lying dense, cloud-like mists, white against the blackness of the darkening hill-

sides. The last red rays of the sinking sun threw upon her face a weird unnatural glow, and caused her moist eyes to glisten like strange gems in the sun-lit marble of her still features. The wild sweet sadness of her expression, like that of a gentle animal who has been stricken, and does not know why, brought a lump into my throat, and caused me to halt at some distance from her with a feeling of shy respect.

Ta-ta, who sat by her side, with a sensitively-dilating nose on the young girl's knee, saw me at once, but merely wagged her tail as an apologetic intimation that I must excuse her from attendance on me, as she had weightier business on hand than mere idle frisking about my heels.

But the movement in her companion attracted Babiole's attention ; she turned her head, saw me, and started up.

The spell was broken ; she was in a

moment the sweet smiling Babiole of every day. But I could not so soon get over the shock of the first sight of her face: I had seemed to read vague prophecies in the wide sad eyes. I smiled and held out my hand, but I left it to her to open the conversation.

CHAPTER XIII

'It's very nice up here, isn't it, Mr. Maude?' Babiole said, after a few seconds' search for an opening remark.

'But it's much too late for you to be out here by yourself.'

'Yes. I had forgotten it was so late,' she said humbly, with a sensitive blush at my mild reproof. 'Poor mamma wanted to be quiet, and told me to go out; so I came here.'

She was winding about her the thick plaid she always carried when the weather was cold; and this, when adjusted Highland fashion across the shoulder, made her, in

conjunction with the knitted Tam-o'-Shanter cap she wore, a most picturesque and appropriate figure among the dead heather and the fir-trees.

'You look like Helen M'Gregor,' said I, smiling.

She smiled back brightly, but shook her head.

'I haven't courage enough for myself, much less enough to inspire anybody else with,' she said rather sadly.

'Courage is a thing you can't measure until you have to use it. What makes you think you have none, Babiole? I feel sure you have a great deal.'

She began to laugh, in the shyest, sweetest, prettiest way; and, putting her hand on the stout stick I carried, she twisted it round and round in the earth, and looked up in my face affectionately.

'Yes, yes, I know. That is the way you

always teach me. You told me I was intelligent and industrious, until I began to be both; and I daresay, if you were to tell me long enough,—in your own kind way, helping me on by your own strong wish,—that I was brave, why I should become so. But I'm not now.'

'Tell me how you know that.'

'Well, to-day I only heard of something that—that would be very hard to bear, and I broke down altogether.'

'What was it?'

No answer.

'Was it something your father said?'

She looked up with a flash of inquiry in her eyes.

'Was it something about your going away from here?'

She answered by a look only; a look that was timid, mournful, affectionate, and that had yet another element; for behind all this

tenderness and softness, there danced the restless yearning of an eager young spirit.

'Well, and haven't I heard certain people talking about the interesting things that go on in the world, and hinting that Ballater was a slow and tiresome old place, where nothing ever happened worth mentioning?'

She blushed and hung her head a moment, and then began her defence in a very meek voice.

'I don't think I've really ever spoken so ungratefully as that about dear old Ballater. It's quite true that I should like to see a little more of the big world outside some day, but I think I could be content to hear what you care to tell me about it for a year or two longer first. The fact is, Mr. Maude,' she went on, looking up at me with an altogether irresistible smile of affection and sympathy, 'I could make up my mind to leave the hills, but I can't make up my mind to leave you.'

What an opening! I began to shiver and quake and to give signs of such unmistakable nervousness that Babiole evidently thought I was going to be taken with a fit of some sort. She looked helplessly around, and I gave a laugh like a schoolboy who comes too early to his first ball.

'I'm not ill, Babiole; I have something to say to you.'

Upon this she became nearly as much disturbed as I, and the colour left her sensitive face, as she sat mutely down on the tree-trunk again to hear me.

'I—don't want you to—go away—either — Babiole,' I jerked out slowly and unsteadily. 'You are very young, and I think you can afford to wait before seeing the world,—if you are not tired of this place and the people in it. Everybody here likes you, I may say, loves you; and, at any rate, if the life is not very exciting, it has no great cares.

But your father, who does not know us so well as you do, is reluctant to leave you here without some sort of—of formal guarantee for your safety.' Babiole looked up at me from time to time in bewildered expectancy of something new and awful.

'Safety!' she echoed in an amazed whisper.

'Yes. Girls, when they grow to your age, must have a—a responsible guardian, you know. How old are you?'

'I shall be sixteen in July.'

'Well, you see, in a few years you will be old enough to be married, and your father is naturally anxious to see you well provided for: established, you know, settled—in fact, married.'

Babiole was growing calmer. On reflection, of course there was nothing so alarming in the mention of a woman's natural end as to justify the horror which one is accustomed

to consider maidenly; but I was surprised at the time to find that she listened to me so quietly. I thought it would have helped me more if she had shied at the subject, so to speak; some little show of emotion of one kind or another would have spurred me on to make a better business of the whole thing than I was doing. Her eyes, instead of being raised from time to time inquiringly to mine, were now fixed on the last faint glow of sunlight behind the hills; but she said nothing, and I had to go on.

'He is so bent upon it, in fact, that he says that, young as you are, he will only let you remain here longer on one condition.'

She looked up quickly, with a change of expression which I took for that of vague apprehension.

'What condition?'

'You must be engaged—affianced—to some one he approves of before he leaves you.'

Babiole began to laugh. 'But papa must know that that is ridiculous. I am not a princess, to make so much fuss about. Besides, I am old enough, mamma says, to stay with her if I like.'

'We can't complain of your father for thinking so much of you. And there is a very simple way of satisfying him, if you really do care to stay any longer at the old cottage. Remember, your father could easily persuade your mother to go away with him if he were bent on having you; and then the old life for her would begin again.'

The girl rose to her feet in great excitement.

'What is the simple way?'

'You can become engaged to me.

I had not prepared her in the least, after all. She did not start or speak, but I could see by her face that she was utterly surprised. I was afraid of a hasty refusal, and now

screwed up to the pitch of daring, I hurried on without further hesitation.

'You know, Babiole, I am not asking you to marry me now, or at any future time. That must be for a handsomer, more dashing fellow than I. But I want you to understand that I am your guardian up to the time when the dashing young fellow turns up; and till then we will be just as we have always been. You understand, child, that there is to be no binding tie on you at all, nothing new except the understanding that I am answerable to your father for your safety and happiness. Now, are you willing to have me?'

I tried to put the question as a joke, but I was much moved.

She put her hand into mine without at first answering, but her eyes were full of tears before I had ended.

'I will do whatever you wish, now and always, Mr. Maude,' she said so sweetly, so

softly, that at once I began to realise the peril to myself of what I had done, as a great yearning seized me to draw the little creature into my arms, and tell her what a poor chance it was that she would ever find among the fair-featured sons of men a slave so docile as I would be for just the right to cherish her.

I wish I had, now.

Then, however, I only said, 'That's right,' in a strangled voice; and we began to go down the hill together. But I discovered that this explanation, which was to have been so small and simple a thing, had already changed in some degree the character of our intercourse. Babiole gave me her hand to help her down, as freely and simply as she had often done before; but it seemed to me now that it was the hand of a fair young woman, instead of the hand of a child. It was some change in the girl herself, and not in me, I felt sure, for I had been fully

conscious of my own love and my own longings ever since, on my return from Norway, I had found her still with the sweet flower-face, but with the form and shy proud manner of a budding woman. I considered this phenomenon as we crossed the wild bare slope beneath the fir-trees, and as we found our way through the growing darkness of the oak-branches, with the silver water shining before us in the distance, and the mist gathering about us as we went down. There was no touch of coquetry about her manner whereby I could take courage, but a very pretty gravity which seemed to denote that even such a poor thing as a temporary and make-believe engagement to marry demanded that one should put away childish things and talk about the affairs of the nation.

We both enjoyed that walk back to Larkhall very much; she, because of the delicious new sense of importance which our secret

understanding gave her; I, because there was now a link, however frail, between us, and because I was already deep enough in the mire to feel that there was but a maimed poor creature in my place when she was out of my sight. It was dark when we got into the drive, and Mr. and Mrs. Ellmer were both about, peering into bushes, and calling their daughter in a futile way, rather to fill up the time when their *tête-à-tête* palled, than because they really expected to find her under a rhododendron or a laurel.

'I told you she was all right,' said the lady sharply, as we came up.

'Aha! Where have you been?' asked her husband with ponderous roguery.

'On Craigendarroch, papa,' answered Babiole simply, letting her arm remain in mine, this being the straightforward way I had chosen of making known the result of our meeting.

Mrs. Ellmer was eager to break up the party, and insisted that Babiole's boots must be wet, and that she ought to come and change them. But the artist had something to say first.

'She won't catch cold. She's been too well employed, haven't you, Bab?' he asked, seizing her by the arm, with a laugh that set her blushing.

I hastened to put a stop to this inquisition.

'She will tell you all about it presently. I think she had better go with her mother now, while I speak to you, Mr. Ellmer.'

He let her go, being in high good humour, consequent upon the discovery and appropriation of some whisky in his wife's cupboard. I told him that his daughter had consented to become engaged to me, and assured him that I would do my best to make her happy. He grew a little maudlin over the hardship of parting with an only daughter,

which, though rather far-fetched, was to be expected; but he was genuinely glad that she was well provided for, and took care to point out to me with some shrewdness that his pride in his daughter was perfectly disinterested, as he had been so long a waif and stray upon the world that the world was considered by his relations as bound to support him, even if he had not been, as he was, too proud to accept from any man more than a mount when he was footsore, or a drink when he was thirsty.

I began to feel quite sorry for the poor beggar, and the feeling was increased later, in spite of his causing me to pass a most uncomfortable evening. They all came in to see me after dinner. Mr. Ellmer watched Babiole about with great pride, tried her voice at the piano, on which he performed with some taste, and declared that it was good enough for grand opera. On the other hand

he missed no opportunity of snubbing his wife with ferocity, begged her not to skip, and advised her to leave her juvenile ways to her daughter. Poor Babiole spent the evening in torture. At each word of extravagant praise to herself she blushed uncomfortably; at every unkind speech to her mother the tears came to her eyes. In the climax of her misery I bore a most unwilling share.

I was bidding them all good-night on the door-step, and was shaking hands with Babiole, when Mr. Ellmer, who had several times during the evening disconcerted us both by tactless reference to the supposed excited state of our feelings, said jocularly, that that was not the way sweethearts parted when he was young. Ready to satisfy him, but afraid to offend or frighten Babiole, I laughed awkwardly and hesitated, while the young girl blushed and tried, for the first time, to withdraw her hand from mine.

'Don't be affected, Bab,' said her father roughly.

I would have let her go, but at the sharp words she shivered, and put up her face with a sob of sensitive terror to mine. I stooped and kissed her, and if she shrank from the touch of my trembling lips, or the contact of my hideous face with her fair cheek, at least she felt none of the burning bitterness which seemed to turn my very heart to gall, and the caress of my hungry lips into a sting. For the remembrance of the last fair girl I had kissed, of the languid indifference which had left her cold to my devotion, rushed into my brain and gave added venom to this second and more severe misfortune. She drew away from me with a new timidity, and ran down the steps after her mother, while Mr. Ellmer smoked a last cigar with me in the garden, and called upon me to condole with him, which, in the disturbed state of thought and feeling

I was in, I was ready enough to do. For when he pitifully dilated on the life his acid-tempered wife had led him, on the coldness with which she had always repelled instead of encouraged him, on the martyr-like airs with which she had received his every attempt to reform, I felt that I was ready to side with the most worthless man living against the most worthy woman, and listened sympathetically; and when he pointed to the dutifully subdued fear which shone in his daughter's eyes, in answer to the gaze of his own affection, I listened in silence to his cynical conclusion :—

'Women, they make you pay by the nose either way, sir. If they're not honest, they take it out of your pocket; if they're honest, they take it out of your heart. But rob you, one way or another, they all will to the end.'

And he went off to the cottage in a meek

and maudlin manner, which made his subsequent conduct a most bewildering surprise. For, on the following morning, Mrs. Ellmer was not to be seen, and, on her next appearance in public some evenings later, it was evident that her husband had made a forcible appeal to her memory of old times by giving her a black eye. In the meantime Babiole was wild, shy and unapproachable by either her father or me. This state of affairs being untenable, and his wife's very small provision of whisky exhausted, Mr. Ellmer in the course of the afternoon took a dispirited farewell of us, armed with a note to the station-master at Aberdeen, which I explained would obtain him a free railway-pass to London. He thanked me for my courtesy, but was by no means disarmed by it. In the midst of a sentimental leave-taking, he suddenly flashed up into ferocity as I reminded him that his wife and daughter were well and safe with

each other, which must be some comfort in the prolonged absence from them which the claims of Art forced upon him.

'Well and safe!' he repeated, his face resuming the brutal lowering look which had, under the amenities of social intercourse, sunk into a placid animal contentment. 'Yes, I should hope so. For I can tell you it would be a bad time for those who had anything to do with it when my little girl was anything else but well and safe.'

The man was in earnest,—genuine brutal earnest. Without again offering me his hand, and with merely a nod by way of last salutation, he left me in the study, where we had been holding this last interview, with impulsive abruptness. I sat down and looked at the fire, glad the man was gone, and thinking no more of him, but of his fair little daughter, and of the best means of effacing the uncomfortable impression made by this violent and

unwelcome irruption into our old harmonious intercourse.

I had been occupied thus about ten minutes, disturbed by no sound but the dashing of the rain of a sharp April shower against the windows, when the hall-door was pushed open again, and the hoarse gruff voice I had hoped to hear no more broke upon my unwilling ears again.

'Come, no nonsense, aren't you safe with your own father?' I heard Mr. Ellmer say angrily, to the accompaniment of plaintive pleadings and protests from Babiole, whom, the next moment, he dragged in before me. He had not waited for her to put on a hat, but had thrown over her head her mother's mackintosh, which he now pulled off, leaving her pretty brown hair tumbling in disorder about her eyes. She was pitifully shy and unhappy, poor child, and she shrank back with crimson cheeks as her father drew her

arm firmly through his, and brought her close up to me as I stood, in great anger and perturbation, on the hearthrug.

'Mr. Maude,' he said, 'you will excuse a father's solicitude.'

He had been making up that opening as he came along I felt sure, from the pompous effect with which he produced it. He raised his hand as I was bursting into an angry protest, and continued—

'You have obtained my daughter's consent and my consent to becoming her affianced husband.' This, too, was a studied phrase, brought out with pedantic decision. 'On that understanding I leave her and her mother in this neighbourhood with confidence, and I call upon you to swear——'

But here Babiole broke away from him, and retreating quickly to the other side of the table, out of reach of the rough paternal arm,

she cried out, with burning cheeks and flashing blue eyes—

'Papa, you are insulting Mr. Maude, and I can't listen. He has been the best friend we ever had; nobody knows how good he is; and now for you, who ought to thank him,—honour him for what he has been to us,—to talk as if you mistrusted him, as if we mistrusted him,—Oh, it is too horrible! I can't bear it! How can we stay here after this? How, if we do stay here, can we look him in the face? He is the best man in all the world, and the kindest, and the cleverest; and oh! you might have trusted him, and not have brought this shame upon us!'

And the poor child crouched down upon the nearest chair, and turned away her head to hide her falling tears.

Her father listened to this outburst with unmoved pompous stolidity; but as she

sank down, he looked from her to me with a proud and satisfied glance, as much as to say, 'Do you observe my daughter's exquisite sensibility? This is one of the results of a parent's devotion to Art.'

'Mr. Ellmer, let me walk down the drive with you,' said I hurriedly, quite unmanned and nerveless at the sight of the girl's distress. 'Surely, we can arrange everything to your satisfaction by ourselves.'

'There I differ from you,' said he, doggedly holding his ground, determined to carry through to the end his own more dramatic plan of settlement. 'I am a father, Mr. Maude, and a father's sense of his duty to his child must be respected. I am not insensible that you have so far shown yourself quite the gentleman.'

Babiole, so to speak, curled up at this.

'And therefore I have permitted this

engagement. But I must have it plain that I hold you responsible for my little girl's happiness, and that if anything goes wrong with her, it is you—you, Mr. Maude—who will have to answer for it to me!'

He spoke with savage earnestness which impressed me, and struck terror into his daughter, whom he kissed with genuinely passionate tenderness on both cheeks.

'Good-bye, Bab,' said he; 'be a good girl, and don't grow too like your mother. Don't be too sweet to the man you fancy till he's your husband, and you'll have more sweetness to spare for him then. Don't believe your mother when she says your father's nothing but a blackguard, for he'll do more for you at a pinch than any of your beaux. Good-bye, child. God bless you!'

She kissed him, trembling, with timid affection answering to his tenderness—

'Good-bye, papa,' she said, and added in a whisper, 'Won't you some day live with mamma and me again? We would try to make you happy, and I am learning to understand all about Art.'

'Ah, well, some day perhaps,' he said hastily, and disengaged himself from her twining arms.

I thought he was going out without any further greeting to me, but close to the door he stopped, and giving me a stolid frown, jerked his head slowly back in the direction of his daughter; then, with a menacing nod to remind me of his warning, he left the room and the house. A minute later I saw him blubbering,—there is no other word for it,—like a great overgrown child as he went down the drive.

I waited at the window on purpose to give Babiole time to recover enough serenity

to bridge over the awkwardness of the situation. The startling necessity of the case restored her to full self-command much sooner than I had expected. After a very few minutes, during which I heard her sobs die away like a child's into silence, I ventured to turn round, and found her with red swollen eyelids and a very sad little face, but perfectly calm. She rose from her chair in quite a dignified way, and said—

'We have kept you from your work, I am afraid, Mr. Maude,' with the odd primness which I could remember as one of her earliest characteristics.

'Not at all. I — I was not busy,' I answered, with frozen stiffness.

For the moment I dared not speak to her, except under this ridiculous mask of frigidity; such a lot of indiscreet emotions were bubbling up in me, ready to burst into rash speech at the first opening. She seemed a

little dismayed by my coldness, and hung her head in what I knew to be shame at her father's clumsy show of mistrust.

'Well, you shall have a little peace now at least,' she said, without looking at me, as she crossed to the door.

'And to-day's lessons?' I asked rather abruptly.

'I think I will ask you to excuse me to-day,' she said in a trembling voice.

'Certainly,' said I, with an involuntary bow, which caused her to look up and redden at this unusual ceremoniousness.

The old footing was, for a time at least, completely destroyed.

'Good-afternoon, Mr. Maude,' she said.

'Good-afternoon,' I repeated.

But, as she took another step and reached the screen, her shy glance met mine; impulsively she stretched out her hand. I seized it, and for one brief minute we looked

straight into each other's eyes with the frank confidence of our old friendship: the next, she had broken away, and I was left alone with silent To-to and sympathetic Ta-ta.

END OF VOL. I

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